DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 924 RC 022 634

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TITLE Rural and Isolated School Students and Their Higher Education Choices: A Re-Examination of Student Location, Socioeconomic Background, and Educational Advantage and Disadvantage. Commissioned Report.

INSTITUTION Melbourne Univ. (Australia). Centre for the Study of Higher Education.; Melbourne Univ. (Australia). Youth Research Centre.; Australian National Board of Employment, Education, and Training, Canberra. Higher Education Council.

REPORT NO CR-62
ISBN ISBN-0-642-23921-5
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 131p.
AVAILABLE FROM Full text at Web site: http://www.detya.gov.au/nbeet/publications/#hec.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; *Access to Education; *College Attendance; Disadvantaged; Education Work Relationship; Foreign Countries; Geographic Isolation; High School Students; Higher Education; Paying for College; Public Policy; Rural Education; *Rural Urban Differences; *Rural Youth; Secondary Education; Socioeconomic Influences; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Rural Culture

ABSTRACT

The imbalances between the higher education participation of rural and urban Australians are significant and persistent. This study examined the attitudes, goals, and plans of Australian senior high school students via a survey of over 7,000 students in grades 10-12 in three states, complemented by interviews with about 350 students in 20 rural schools. Findings indicate that: (1) higher education participation for people in rural and isolated areas is affected less by distance from university campuses than by socioeconomic circumstances and the influences of rural social and cultural contexts; (2) rural students are more likely than urban students to perceive inhibitors to higher education such as the cost of living away from home or losing touch with friends, and to experience fewer encouraging factors such as parental encouragement or the belief that a university education will offer them an interesting and rewarding career; and (3) the cost of higher education is a serious barrier for rural students. Two cornerstone recommendations are for the creation of an integrated suite of education, family, and employment policies and the establishment of a high profile task force to oversee new initiatives in these areas. Seven other recommendations include exposing students to the value of higher education during their junior and middle years, introducing measures to reduce higher education costs for rural students, encouraging universities to seek enrollments from rural students, and improving prospects for graduate employment in rural Australia. Appendices contain details of methodology and percentages of rural, isolated, and lower-SES students at specific Australian universities. (Contains 36 references.) (TD)

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Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices

A re-examination of student location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage

Commissioned Report No. 62

Richard James, Johanna Wyn, Gabrielle Baldwin, Gary Hepworth, Craig McInnis and Andrew Stephanou

Centre for the Study of Higher Education
and
Youth Research Centre
The University of Melbourne

1999

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ISBN 0 642 23921 5

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HEC Introduction

In the 1991 census, 24.3 per cent of Australians were identified as having a rural background. A further 4.5 per cent were identified as coming from isolated areas. Put together, this accounted for 29.8 percent of the Australian population.

In our universities, however, the statistical picture was somewhat skewed from this norm. In 1997, 17.4 per cent of students were identified as having a rural background, and a further 1.8 percent as coming from isolated areas. The combined proportion, 19.2 per cent, reflected a rural and isolated proportional share of the student population that has stayed relatively stable through the 1990s.

A higher education participation rate of barely 19 per cent versus a national population share of nearly 30 per cent should concern all those with an interest in the future development of the intellectual assets and potential of all Australians , regardless of where they live.

That the disproportion is so great despite the development in recent years of a national network of "regional" universities is also noteworthy.

Successive Commonwealth governments have sought to respond to this issue. Primarily, students from rural and isolated backgrounds have been identified as members of a designated target group in the framework of the 1991 higher education equity policy statement *A Fair Chance for All*. As a result, their higher education participation since has been monitored closely by Government and by universities themselves. Additionally, a range of targeted incentives have been developed over recent years to assist rural and isolated Australians both enrol and participate in university study.

While such equity measures are important, even vital, we as a nation need to develop a better qualitative understanding of why it is that so relatively few students from rural and remote areas choose to progress from school to higher education. Is it simply a matter of distance that deters many rural and isolated students from "going on to Uni"? Is it study time or time away from home? Is it money and cost?

Indeed, are there less concrete factors at work, including local social and cultural networks and values? Is it that a university degree or diploma is not always seen as necessary to continue to live and work in rural and remote Australia? Is it a definable combination of a range of factors including these?

Over the years, the Higher Education Council has taken a strong interest in equity and participation issues. After evaluating its 1996 report ***Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Higher Education Equity Framework***, the Council realised that relatively little consideration had been given to seeking to answer such questions definitively.

That realisation led to the commissioning of this study by the Council. It essentially wanted to gather evidence-based information and insight on two particular points. Firstly it sought to discover what, if any differences could be found between the factors influencing students from the urban areas and students from rural and isolated locations. Secondly, the Council wanted to know whether or not socio-economic status is a contributing factor in student's choices.

The short answers to these questions, based on the findings of this study, are yes and yes. Largely, this was predicted at the outset. But the reasons for those answers, on the same evidence, are complex and not so clear-cut.

The study team, from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at The University of Melbourne, have produced a high-quality report made truly eloquent by the team's considerable success in tapping into the thinking of young people in both urban and regional Australia. The study's overall findings have clear messages for policy-makers, service providers, secondary and tertiary education authorities, and the Australian community generally.

The CSHE team's conclusions, set out succinctly in the report's Executive Summary, are strong and evidence-based, and their recommendations for future collective action and strategic planning carry much merit.

But in evaluating those conclusions and recommendations, what lessons stand out for those who are committed to equality of access to higher education as a desirable social goal? Three such lessons are worth commenting on briefly here.

A first is that this study is a refreshing reminder that the late secondary school cohort, as the main feeder group for Australian universities, cannot be taken for granted and treated as a homogenous nationwide whole when planning policies and programmes. For homogenous it is not.

Aspirations for higher education, on this study's evidence, are influenced by a subtle web of interwoven characteristics. These include social background, financial resources, where people live and the collective values of the local community culture. The precise composition of that web, and the relative strength of its many strands, are both localised and highly personal.

For some in rural and isolated areas, the opportunity to progress to higher education offers an escape from rural life and uncertain life prospects, and is seen an entrée to the wider world. That many rural and isolated young Australians want to pursue university studies is undoubted.

But for many others in those areas, the web can operate in a way that is more likely to deter young people from going on to Uni, rather than encouraging them. It can, in the eyes of those who see higher education participation as a positive thing, entrap rather than empower. Yet it has to be noted, and accepted by the wider Australian community, that often those who appear to be so "trapped" are actually content with their situation in life, and with their chosen place of living and its associated way of life. Sometimes people with an urban or higher education-focused perspective may find this difficult to understand.

Instead, this study indicates that the pull of the local community and peer group, even of the local football team, can in some cases be the difference in deciding whether a young country person – particularly a young man – tries for higher education or not. More interestingly, such intangible lifestyle factors may have as much, if not more, sway than the more obvious factors such as cost and expense, and distance from home. Such factors need to be taken into account, and not dismissed out of hand.

The challenge for those working with rural and isolated students, therefore, is ensuring that whatever choices those young people make about their future, they can do so with their eyes wide open to the full range of possibilities. But in saying that, it is also important to say that such strategies of information and persuasion are applied non-judgmentally by those seeking to influence young people's personal choices.

A second notable lesson from the study is that when students are motivated to go to university, and shape their personal directions accordingly, a person's distance from a university or campus is not in itself a relatively major issue in their choices of either the institutions or courses of intended study.

It may be an active example of the principle of "in for a penny, in for a pound", but the study evidence indicates very strongly that for rural and isolated secondary students, the more important choice factor is the availability of the best course in their area of interest, not the relative physical proximity of a university or campus. In other words, if a young person decides to travel any distance at all to go to Uni, they will more likely put their study interests first, and their geographical convenience second.

This sense of making a discriminating and sophisticated choice sends a message of its own, especially to the institutions which have developed and marketed themselves as "regional" universities. Just because an institution has identified for itself a geographical catchment area, there is no guarantee that it will catch the potential students it has targeted. If a student has a clear idea of what he or she wants, and feels that he or she will not necessarily gain that outcome at the nearby "regional" institution, then they are very likely to go elsewhere, and just as probably will apply for admission to a capital city university or campus.

In attracting students, those regional institutions therefore need to look as much, if not more, to their quality and their reputation as to their geographical advantages. This has follow-on implications in relation to institutional funding, infrastructure and to their teaching and research profiles.

For the regional universities themselves, there is also the marketing challenge to enhance the way they are perceived and regarded in their catchment areas, and to be seen as being as responsive as possible to the needs of their targeted potential students. To be fair, this is something already well-recognised by them. The implications of this go beyond the scope of this project, but still need to be considered if we as a community are striving to deliver the best possible higher education opportunities and choices for people in rural and isolated areas.

A third salient lesson emerging from this study lie in the conclusions and recommendations offered by the consultants. The challenges posed by the disproportionate representation of people from rural and isolate backgrounds in higher education are very complex. The consultants make some constructive and commendable suggestions, but one thing from their findings is clear: there is no one simple solution.

If higher education participation, as a personal and social goal, is to be promoted effectively among students from country Australia, any approach to the issue is not the responsibility of just one government, or one portfolio area.

Indeed, Commonwealth, State and local governments need to work together cooperatively to develop and implement strategic responses to the challenge. Arguably, it is the in-school experience which may be uppermost in students' decision-making processes when it comes to considering going to university. The Commonwealth may fund higher education and student assistance, for instance, but the States and Territories mostly finance the operation of country schools, and in government schools the States and Territories employ the great majority of the teachers who both prepare students for university and who are often role models capable of firing those students' academic ambitions. They therefore have a big role to play in any related participation strategy.

Local governments too can play their part in promoting the higher education participation of rural and isolated students. They can help by encouraging students to go to university for higher learning and professional training, while increasing the chance of them returning to the local community. Some rural councils, for instance, have developed highly imaginative incentive packages that encourage talented young local people to study medicine in metropolitan universities, yet help them to retain links with their communities that encourage them to come home on graduation. Such initiatives could be models for broader schemes.

It follows that community involvement in developing appropriate approaches to encouraging rural and isolated student participation in higher education is essential. Strategies and measures cannot simply be imposed from Canberra or State capitals. They need to lead to measures which can be local, targeted, and community-owned and led.

The Council therefore endorses very strongly the consultants' over-arching recommendation of developing a Federal-State cross-portfolio and cross-agency strategy to address the urban-rural higher education participation gap. We would add, however, that any such policy response must engage the local tier of government, if it is to be fully effective.

Having said this, the Council also commends the individual initiatives identified by the consultants. It particularly supports the last recommendation, suggesting that this research should be the foundation for further study of the factors involved in secondary students' higher education choices. While largely building on current progress, each recommended initiative, in its own way, has the potential to play a positive part in fostering both equality of choice as well as relative equality of participation.

But the fact remains that individual initiatives can achieve little on their own: a coherent and cohesive strategy can achieve much.

The Higher Education Council commends this study for the new ground it breaks, and sees it as essential reading for policy-makers, parliamentarians at all levels of government, university leaders, secondary school principals and teachers, and for all those with a commitment to the intellectual development of our nation.

Higher Education Council

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Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education and the Youth Research Centre of The University of Melbourne.

The research was directed by Richard James (CSHE) and Johanna Wyn (YRC). The project team comprised Gabrielle Baldwin (CSHE), Gary Hepworth (Curtin University), Craig McInnis (CSHE) and Andrew Stephanou (CSHE).

Gabrielle Baldwin developed the 'When I leave school ...' questionnaire and Andrew Stephanou performed all statistical analyses on the responses. Johanna Wyn and Gary Hepworth conducted focus group interviews in Victoria and Western Australia respectively. All members of the project team were involved in preparation of the final report.

The project directors are grateful to Jack Darmody for preparing the school sample and coordinating the distribution and retrieval of questionnaires, to Nike Prince for coordinating questionnaire coding, and to Simon Harvey for preparing a section of the report.

The research team would like to thank the people who contributed to the project through the project steering group: Carolyn Allport, Terry Barnes, Yvette Devlin, Mary Lovett and Geoff See. We are also grateful of course to the students who responded to the survey and the schools that participated.

This report is in memory of Professor John Anwyl, former director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, who had a long-standing commitment to equitable access to Australian higher education.

Executive Summary

1. Current estimates suggest that, on a per capita basis, for every ten urban people who attend university, roughly six rural/isolated Australians do so. With the expansion of access to higher education of the past decade, the higher education participation rates of rural and isolated people have improved, but the participation share relative to urban people has altered little. In particular, the isolated group is one of the most under-represented equity groups in Australian higher education.

2. This report documents a comprehensive investigation of differences in the attitudes and aspirations of school students towards tertiary education. It is based on a survey of over 7000 Year 10-12 students in three states, complemented by interviews conducted with students in twenty rural schools. For comparative analysis, the project surveyed students across urban, rural and isolated locations and across all socioeconomic strata.

3. The research reveals large and striking differences between the attitudes of school students towards their education, particularly on the possibility of going to university.

   Differences in socioeconomic background are clearly the dominant factor in student perspectives on higher education. In descending order of influence, their attitudes are shaped by:

   - family socioeconomic background;
   - whether students are living in urban or rural communities; and
   - the distance from home to the nearest campus.

4. On average, rural students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are significantly less likely than urban students to believe that:

   - a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career; and
   - that their parents want them to do a university course.

   Also, rural students are significantly more likely than urban students to believe that:

   - a university qualification is not necessary for the jobs they want;
   - their families cannot afford the costs of supporting them at university;
   - the cost of university fees may stop them attending; and

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- there is no point in their going to university.

5. Rurality and lower socioeconomic status combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage. The least advantaged students (lower SES students who live long distances from university campuses) have significantly different attitudes from the most advantaged students (urban, higher SES students). At least twice the proportion of the least advantaged students believe that the cost of university fees may stop them attending university (43 per cent compared with 21 per cent) and that a university qualification is not necessary for the jobs they want (31 per cent compared with 15 per cent). Major differences are also found in students' perceptions of their parents' wishes: while 69 per cent of the most advantaged students believe their parents want them to do a university course, only 38 per cent of the least advantaged students believe so.

6. Distance from a campus is not the single major determinant of student choices. The attitudes of rural student towards the relevance and attainability of higher education are mainly a result of their personal socioeconomic circumstances and the rural community context in which they live, rather than sheer distance from a university campus. This is clearly evident in the finding that rural students living relatively close to regional campuses have similar attitudes towards university to their rural counterparts who have low access to campuses — most, for instance, report that they would need to leave home to attend university.

7. Overall, the educational disadvantage of rural students is the result of twin effects: they are more likely than urban students to perceive 'discouraging' inhibitors and barriers, such as the cost of living away from home or losing touch with friends, while at the same time they are likely to experience lower levels of 'encouraging' factors, such as parental encouragement or the belief that a university course will offer them an interesting and rewarding career.

8. The costs of higher education, including fees and the living expenses associated with leaving home, are serious inhibitors or barriers for rural school students. Many rural students and their families face an extremely difficult decision in assessing the costs versus the benefits of higher education. For many financially disadvantaged rural families, the costs are well beyond their income capacity — the prospect of their children entering higher education is simply out of the question.

9. Despite the explicit barrier or disincentive created by the cost of attending university, expense is not the only or major influence on student attitudes. The present imbalances in higher education participation in Australia also reflect differences in family and community attitudes towards the relevance of education. The effects of these powerful social influences are apparent well before the final years of senior schooling or eligibility for university entry — as school completion rates are lower in rural areas, many rural students do not reach the point at which it is meaningful to speak of potential barriers to higher education. For rural students in families and

communities where higher education is seen as less relevant to life and employment, completing school and going on to university is not yet the norm.

Recommendations

The present rural-urban imbalance in Australian higher education participation is unacceptable. It has far-reaching consequences for the development of rural Australia and for the nation as a whole. The lower participation rates of rural and isolated people are an integral component in a cycle of rural disadvantage.

We propose an interrelated group of recommendations. These are not offered as simple correctives, for this would be unrealistic in the light of the present depressed state of some rural economies, the decline in rural infrastructure, and the limited impact of the various equity initiatives implemented during the past decade. Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest areas in which new action could be taken.

It is evident from the social and economic complexity of educational disadvantage that fragmented strategies will not be effective. The issue cuts across portfolio lines, and across federal, state and local government responsibilities. A coordinated policy approach from both federal and state government is urgently needed. With the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport due to release a report in 1999, there is presently an opportunity to develop an integrated national policy framework embracing rural development, education, family support and employment.

Two cornerstone recommendations from this study, therefore, are for the creation of an integrated suite of education, family and employment policies and the immediate establishment of a high profile Rural Education and Employment Taskforce to oversee a series of new initiatives in these areas. These two steps would provide a timely, imaginative and visionary statement of commitment to the development of rural and regional Australia, acknowledging, in particular, the importance of education to that development.

Recommendation 1

- Federal and state government should develop an integrated policy framework, across portfolios and departments, in which narrowing the higher education participation gap between rural and urban Australians is one element in an overall plan for rural and regional development. The framework should focus on coordinated and integrated strategies in three areas:

  - improving school completion rates;

- improving access to and completion of higher education and other post-secondary education and training; and
- improving the employment prospects for graduates in rural areas.

Recommendation 2

■ As part of this policy framework, the federal government should establish a Rural Education and Employment Taskforce whose terms of reference are to oversee a series of new initiatives for improving the education and employment opportunities for young people in country Australia. The Rural Education and Employment Taskforce should be responsible for monitoring, as appropriate, each of the recommendations that follow, giving special priority to Recommendation 3 for increasing the opportunities for rural students and their families to be familiarised with higher education during junior and middle secondary years.

Recommendation 3

■ Original equity initiatives are required during the junior and middle secondary years to encourage students not to foreclose their options by raising student, parent and community awareness of the value of completing school, the attainability of higher education and other post-secondary education and training, and the culture of universities.

Recommendation 4

■ To explore the effectiveness of these and other new equity strategies, the federal government should fund for a three-year period three or four collaborative equity ventures between universities, TAFE colleges and schools. These 'lighthouse' equity initiatives should be in selected regions and should target the individual students most likely to be educationally disadvantaged within them.

Recommendation 5

■ The federal government should introduce measures to reduce the costs associated with higher education for lower and medium SES rural and isolated students. In addition, the federal government and universities should provide rural students with better information on the cost of attending university, including HECS loan liability and repayment requirements.

Recommendation 6

- The federal government should introduce stronger financial incentives for universities to work collaboratively to seek enrolments from rural and isolated people, in particular from the most educationally disadvantaged subgroups.

Recommendation 7

- Universities, TAFE colleges and schools should continue to build flexible pathways, flexible study arrangements, and credit transfer arrangements. In particular, rural students are likely to benefit from multiple entry points to higher education, including seamless TAFE-higher education pathways, and curricula that permit appropriate work and study arrangements.

Recommendation 8

- As part of rural and regional development, the federal government should explore opportunities for improving the prospects for graduate employment in country Australia.

Recommendation 9

- Students socioeconomic backgrounds are stronger influences on their attitudes towards higher education than their geographical locations. Further research is needed, including extensive focus group interviews, to identify the factors that continue to inhibit the higher education participation of school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Research of this kind would be of immediate value in policy formation. In addition, systematic longitudinal monitoring of trends in educational participation and attitudes for both rural and isolated people and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds would be valuable.

Introduction

One of the persistent inequities in Australian higher education is the relatively low participation rate of people from rural or isolated backgrounds. The objective of this study is to re-investigate this issue.

The imbalances between the higher education participation of rural and urban Australians are not small. On aggregate Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs participation figures, university students from rural and isolated backgrounds comprised 19.2 per cent of the total student population in 1997, a participation share dramatically below the equity reference point of 28.8 per cent derived from 1996 census data.

That this gap remains after a decade or more of system and institutional equity initiatives is a sign of the complexity of the problem. Tackling it requires a radical rethinking of the factors that inhibit and encourage the participation in higher education of people in rural and isolated areas.

The difficulties in delivering higher education to a dispersed population in a continent the size of Australia are obvious. As the present research clearly shows, however, the higher education participation for people in rural and isolated areas is affected less by distance from university campuses than by socioeconomic circumstances and the influences of rural social and cultural contexts. Socioeconomic effects are generally more pronounced and pervasive than any effects of location identified by this study.

The focus of this study is the attitudes, goals and plans of Australian school students in their senior school years. The research involved a quantitative comparison by survey of urban and rural school students (7023 useable responses from Year 10, 11, and 12 students in three states and attending school in all sectors). This dataset is complemented by a substantial qualitative investigation of the factors that students in rural and isolated areas perceive to be central in their decisions regarding their future and the possibility of higher education (focus group interviews in two states, conducted with approximately 350 students in 20 schools).

The report examines students' personal goals, their attitudes towards school and education, and their objectives for life after school, especially their thoughts on the prospects of attending university. The purpose is to reveal the similarities and contrasts in the aspirations and choices of young people in urban and rural Australia, taking into account the powerful effect of socioeconomic background.

Not all of the imbalance between rural and urban participation in higher education can be addressed by the higher education sector, since part of the under-representation of rural people is due to lower school retention rates. Nevertheless,

1

The Social Composition of the Student Population in the 1990s

In 1990, A Fair Chance for All (DEET 1990) set national equity objectives and targets for six groups identified as disadvantaged in gaining access to higher education: people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; women (particularly in non-traditional areas of study); people from non-English speaking backgrounds; people with disabilities; and people from rural and isolated areas. At the time, previous analyses of the social composition of the university population had consistently identified these groups as disadvantaged in their access to higher education (Anderson & Vervoorn 1983).

Following A Fair Chance for All, and in the context of the trend towards mass higher education, the disadvantage of the designated population subgroups has been the focus for program initiatives designed to assist higher education access, participation and retention across the system. Yet despite these equity initiatives, and advances in access for many of the target groups, though not always to the point of equality, the participation rates of two groups have not improved: people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and people who live in rural or isolated areas.

As table 1.1 on the following page shows, the participation of people from rural backgrounds has declined slightly relative to urban Australians in recent years, though this small effect may be due to a population shift to urban areas. In 1997, the proportion of rural students participating in higher education was 17.4 per cent (measured as per cent of enrolled non-overseas students), around three-quarters of the reference population value, estimated at 24.3 per cent from the 1991 census data (Andrews et al 1998: 8). The situation for isolated students was worse, with the proportion of 1.8 per cent being less than half the population reference value of 4.5 per cent (Andrews et al 1998: 8).

Similarly, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remain significantly under-represented in higher education. The 1997 proportion of 14.5 per cent for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds fell dramatically below the defined population reference point of 25 per cent. Correspondingly, university students in Australia are of well above average socioeconomic status (SES). Skuja (1995: 83) placed these social differences in higher education participation in stark contrast: in 1995, while people from lower SES backgrounds were substantially under-represented (by roughly 40 per cent of population share) and people from medium SES backgrounds were moderately under-represented (by 10 per cent), the participation rates of people from high SES backgrounds exceeded population share by around 60 per cent.

Table 1.1 Participation by Equity Groups: Per Cent of Enrolled Non-overseas Students

Equity Group	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*Reference values*
People with a disability (1)	na	na	na	na	na	1.0	1.3	4.0
Indigenous students (2)	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.4/1.7
People of non-English speaking background (3)	4.3	4.7	5.0	5.2	5.5	5.4	5.1	4.9/4.8
People from rural backgrounds (4)	18.5	18.7	18.5	18.0	17.7	17.7	17.4	24.3
People from isolated backgrounds (est.) (5)	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.0	1.8	1.8	4.5
People from lower SES backgrounds (6)	15.0	15.0	14.8	14.8	14.9	14.4	14.5	25.0

(1) No data available prior to 1996. Figure shows students who have answered "yes" to the two questions, "Do you have a disability, impairment or long-term medical condition which may affect your studies?" and "Would you like to receive advice on support services, equipment and facilities which may assist you?". Reference value is an estimate of persons with disabilities in Australian population in 15-64 age group potentially able to enter higher education.

(2) Reference values calculated on 1991 Census and 1996 Census respectively.

(3) Reference values calculated on 1991 Census and 1996 Census respectively. For the purposes of the higher education equity statistics, people from a non-English speaking background are defined as those who were born overseas, arrived in Australia within the previous ten years and speak a language other than English at home.

(4) Reference value based on data obtained from the 1991 Census.

(5) Reference value is based on data from the 1991 Census

(6) Reference value is set at 25 per cent of the population. Adapted from Andrews et al (1998).

These figures provide discomforting evidence that the gaps in access to higher education for rural and isolated people and people of lower socioeconomic background are far from bridged: individuals' chances of going to university in Australia are still determined by their geographical locations and the social stratum to which their families belong. Despite the mushrooming growth in

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higher education and the overall expansion in access throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, regional and social imbalances in higher education participation appear strongly resistant to change.

Imbalances in higher education participation also occur at a second level, in demographic variations in the composition of student populations by field of study and institution. The aggregate participation rates for rural and isolated people and people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds mask significant variations in the institutions which people seek to attend and to which they are successful in gaining access. As the table in appendix 1 shows, there are marked contrasts between Australian universities in the proportion of equity group students as a percentage of enrolled non-overseas students. There are also significant variations by field of study. Rural students are over-represented in Agriculture but under-represented in all other fields of study. Access and participation rates approach national levels in Education and Veterinary Science but are considerably below population share in other professional areas such as Architecture, Business and Law (Skuja 1995: 76). Rural students are substantially and consistently over-represented in sub-degree level programs. Access and participation rates decline sharply, however, as the level of course increases; rural students are under-represented in degree level courses and participation rates are even lower at postgraduate level (Skuja 1995: 76).

The Problem of Measuring Rurality and Socioeconomic Status

While relative participation rates show consistent patterns of under-representation for people of lower socioeconomic background and people from rural or isolated areas, some caution is necessary in interpreting the figures. The definition and measurement of socioeconomic status and rurality or isolation are notoriously difficult. The aggregate participation figures referred to in this chapter are calculated on the basis of the postcode of students' permanent home address, as self-reported for the annual statistical data collection of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Two indices have been utilised for calculating participation rates, based on residential postcode. The thresholds used for defining geographical areas and for establishing socioeconomic subgroupings are somewhat arbitrary. Student geographic status is defined as urban, rural or isolated on the basis of the postcode of permanent home address (ABS 1990a, DPIE 1994). In preparation of the index, rurality and isolation are assessed on population density and distance from provincial centres. Students of lower socioeconomic status are defined as those whose home postcode falls within the lowest quartile of the national population, regions being coded on the value of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Education and Occupation (ABS 1990b).

Area measures such as postcodes are without doubt imperfect measurement tools, not only for estimating aggregate higher education participation rates for population subgroups, but also for identifying individuals likely to be disadvantaged (Western et al 1998). Household wealth clearly may vary considerably within a single postcode area. Regional universities and rural campuses provide high access to a university campus (though limited by a narrower course of offerings) for people who live nearby, yet these people are classified for the purposes of measuring possible educational disadvantage as 'rural', along with people living in or close to the distant outback.

Deciding on an appropriate method for defining and measuring students' socioeconomic background and their location was a necessary cornerstone of the present project. The objective in data collection was to examine the intersection of socioeconomic status and residential location — including the effects of distance from a university campus and those of urban or rural community contexts — as a means for comparing the attitudes and aspirations of young people towards higher education. In doing so, the study sought to build a finely detailed picture of various student subgroups and the possible reasons for their educational advantage or disadvantage. The new approach taken to measuring the variables of socioeconomic status, physical access to a campus, and rurality is described in chapter 3.

Rural and isolated people and people of lower socioeconomic background are not visible groups on campus, nor are their interests served by identifiable lobby groups. A critical step towards social equity in educational opportunity may be greater awareness and action on the problem by educators and educational administrators at all levels, especially community opinion leaders such as school principals and academics in leadership positions.

2

Background: The Higher Education Participation of Rural and Isolated People

There was considerable early success with the steps taken in the 1980s to increase the participation of rural and isolated students. Williams et al (1993:73) reported that rural and isolated students had increased their share of entry higher education positions from 19 per cent in 1980 to 22 per cent in 1989. The initiatives that created this growth included the 1984 Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) allocation of additional places to outer metropolitan institutions and the Higher Education Equity Program's 1985 funding of innovative pilot projects to increase the participation of specific disadvantaged groups.

By the time of *A Fair Chance for All*, rural and isolated people were still thought to be disadvantaged by ' ... lower school retention rates, lack of proximity to tertiary institutions, limited curriculum choice and lack of information about the availability of higher education and its benefits' (DEET 1990: 45). The discussion paper recommended tertiary awareness programs, improving distance education opportunities, alternative entry arrangements, bridging and supplementary courses, credit transfer arrangements and assistance with accommodation. System and institutional initiatives included bridging courses, the Link programs (King et al 1993), the inclusion of equity goals in institutional profiles, and the expansion of regional universities. Despite these initiatives, on the 1997 DEETYA figures reported in the previous chapter, the aggregate participation share for rural and isolated students has actually slightly declined, reaching 19.2 per cent (table 1), a return to the 1980 figures reported by Williams (1993:73).

The present research sheds new light on the factors that continue to inhibit participation in higher education for Australians living in rural and isolated regions. To place these findings in context, this chapter gives an overview of previous studies of the issue.

When is the Die Cast?

A portion of the gap between the higher education participation rates of urban and rural/isolated people can be attributed to lower school retention rates in country regions. While there were rapid increases in Year 12 completion rates in Australia from the mid-1980s onwards, the gap in percentage points between the completion rates of urban and rural students has remained reasonable steady. In

fact, the completion rate gap between urban and rural females appears to have broadened, principally due to a large increase in the school completion rate of females in urban areas during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Lamb 1996).

Secondary educational disadvantage in rural areas is usually believed to result from socioeconomic factors, some of which are direct effects of distance, such as 'isolation, non-access to cultural facilities such as theatres, libraries and television, the range and level of local employment and the educational levels and incomes of families' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1975: 75). More specifically, rural schools may suffer from high teacher turnover, a lack of specialist services, a restricted range of curriculum options, and a high proportion of young, inexperienced teachers (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1975: 75-9).

The imbalance in school completion between rural school students and their urban counterparts raises the question of whether or not the problem of access to higher education is a problem of ineligibility in the main part. That is, do the differences in school completion rates explain all of the difference in higher education participation? The answer is no. Even at or near the point of eligibility for entry to higher education (that is, nearing completion of Year 12) there is still evidence of inequality in the transition rates. Recent national figures for Year 12 completion rates of metropolitan and non-metropolitan students (Australian Education Council 1998) provide a crude illustration of this point (table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Comparison of Expected and Observed Higher Education Participation Ratios of Urban and Rural/ Isolated People

	Urban share	***Rural and isolated share***	***Rural and isolated students per 1000 urban students***
Notional equitable participation ratio, based on 1991 census data	**71.2%**	28.8%	**404**
Estimate of expected participation ratio based on 1996 national Year 12 completion data	**74.4%**	25.6%	**344**
Observed participation ratio	**80.8%**	19.2%	**238**

In 1996, Year 12 completion rates, calculated as the proportion of Year 12 completions relative to the estimated population that could complete Year 12 that year, were 68 per cent in metropolitan regions and 58 per cent in non-metropolitan regions. If we were to assume that students went on to higher

education in equal proportion from each of these groups of 'eligibles', then the expected percentages of urban and rural/isolated people in higher education would be 74.4 per cent and 25.6 per cent respectively (calculated on the basis of rural and isolated people comprising 28.8 per cent of the national population). The observed ratios, however, are 80.8 per cent and 19.2 per cent respectively.

This is a raw comparison, since the apparent Year 12 completion rates do not take account of students from rural or isolated areas who relocate to undertake their senior schooling in urban areas. Nevertheless, this rough reckoning suggests that if access to higher education matched the relative retention rates at or near the point of eligibility to enter higher education, then participation rates of rural and isolated students could be expected to be considerably higher than they actually appear to be. On these figures, less than half of the discrepancy in participation is a result of failure to complete school, the majority of the effect being a result of differences in transition rates for eligible students.

This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of previous studies, including Elsworth et al (1982) and Parker et al (1993), which have reported lower rates of application and acceptance of tertiary offers by non-metropolitan students. Parker et al (1993: 87) reported that, although NSW students outside metropolitan areas applied for places at lower rates than metropolitan students, those who did apply received offers at much the same rate. However, non-metropolitan students were then more likely to defer or take no action on their offer. Students who were interviewed highlighted perceived problems of travel, accommodation and finance as influencing their final decision (Parker et al 1993: 87).

Studies of the Interaction of Rurality and Socioeconomic Status

A critical issue for framing equity policy is whether or not distance from a university campus is a dominant causal variable in the lower participation rates of rural and isolated people: the vastness of the Australian continent and the distribution of universities mainly along the coastline (especially to the south-east) invites the supposition that lack of proximity to a university is a major effect. Furthermore, Australians have a tendency to stay at home while at university — unlike in the United States where there is a much stronger tradition of university towns and collegiate residences — adding extra weight to the suspicion that distance is the foremost deterrent, if not barrier.

What does the past research indicate? Since locality and social class are strongly correlated in the postcode indices used for measurement in Australia, it is important to tease apart, as far as possible, the 'distance effect' of rurality and the 'encouragement/discouragement effect' of socioeconomic status. When this is done, the previous research, on balance, suggests the problem of rurality and isolation is not predominantly a physical problem of distance. Social class-

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related effects of student personal attributes, academic achievement and parental influence, and the wider influence of significant others such as teachers, have, in the past, been claimed to be more important factors in the decision whether or not to go on to higher education than has geographical location. In summary, it has been argued that the observed rural-urban differences in participation in higher education have been due in the main part to the characteristics of families related to rurality, rather than to rurality itself — the economic and educational backgrounds of families living in rural areas.

Only one Australian study (Behrens et al 1978), a longitudinal study of 1500 Tasmanian year 9 students, has identified a rural effect which appeared to operate independently of the socioeconomic profile of the area concerned. The country school students of this study were still considerably less likely than those attending city schools to complete schooling, and so qualify for entry to higher education, regardless of the socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which they were living.

All other studies report just the opposite. For example, a 1977 study of Queensland school leavers (cited in Anderson & Vervoorn 1983: 88) found an unambiguous correlation between level of aspiration and social class. Furthermore, this study found that the lower rate of participation by country students in the final years of schooling was clearly connected with a community effect beyond the socioeconomic status of individual families: students' perceptions of the career opportunities available to them in their locality, around which educational aspirations and expectations tended to be adjusted accordingly.

Williams et al (1993: 100) argued their research showed that rural disadvantage is in the main part related to family and community attributes, contending that the principal determining factor is the extent to which education is valued and promoted in the family and local community. They proposed that there is no rural-urban imbalance after educational achievement and encouragement received are taken into account. The apparent advantage of the urban students is therefore principally due to the subtle but significant differences in schooling, achievement and psychological support available to support entry to higher education rather than into the workforce (Williams et al 1993: 74).

By and large, the findings of the present study endorse the conclusions of the Williams et al (1993) research. However, they also show a cumulative effect caused by the coincidence of lower socioeconomic background, rurality and distance from a campus: the students more likely to experience powerful discouraging effects are those of lower socioeconomic background who live in rural areas and who lack proximity to a campus. Furthermore, the present research shows that even rural students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have different attitudes towards the attainability and relevance of higher education compared with their urban counterparts, and may experience some relative educational disadvantage.

That students of lower socioeconomic background are likely to be the most disadvantaged in entering higher education does not imply that their families do not value higher education. Contrary to myth about the 'culture of poverty', people of lower socioeconomic background may strongly desire their children to receive more education than they received themselves (Connell et al 1991: 25). Connell et al (1991: 54) reported that students in the most disadvantaged schools (fathers working in lower paid and low status occupations; higher mobility between schools; and a much higher proportion of migrant children, of whom many spoke little or no English) were not greatly different in their ambitions from students in the more advantaged schools.

There is striking evidence, however, of subgroup differences among lower socioeconomic people in their attitudes towards a university education. Significantly, a series of studies in Victoria in the 1970s (see Anderson & Vervoorn 1983: 11) showed that the educational aspirations of students from lower SES migrant groups were much higher than those of Australian students, especially students from working class families, and that the higher education participation rates of certain migrant groups were generally above average.

These findings from previous studies are notable in at least three ways. First, while there is still some uncertainty about the relative influence of the effects of distance and class, it appears that lower socioeconomic background is a powerful factor which, especially when it coincides with rurality, prevails against completion of schooling and in turn entry to higher education. Second, the existence of educational ambition does not of itself create the family circumstances that lead to educational advantage. Third, as Anderson and Vervoorn argued in their 1983 analysis of subgroup variations in higher education participation, 'there is nothing inevitable about "class" attitudes to education, the low value placed on educational achievement ... is as much a matter of local cultural peculiarities as of socioeconomic position' (1983: 11).

3

This Study

This chapter describes the methodology for the study. Further details are provided in Appendix 2.

The present research is concerned with reaching a better understanding of the current reasons for educational disadvantage (or, conversely, the reasons for educational *advantage*) based on the factors that students themselves perceive to be important, with the aim of using this knowledge as the basis for recommending policy that might effectively achieve equity goals. The project provides the opportunity to establish benchmark indicators for future trend analysis in this area.

Despite a number of Australian studies of higher education participation, there has been little recent comparison of the attitudinal factors influencing student choice among population subgroups, with the exception of DEET commissioned research in 1992 and 1994 (DEET 1993, 1994) of young peoples' attitudes to options for post-compulsory education and training. The analyses of this research were restricted to Sydney—Non-Sydney residential comparisons and the sample was limited to NSW Year 10-12 students. Since the collection of these data, both the school education and post-compulsory education and training contexts have changed markedly.

The approach of the present study has been to ask a wide cross-section of Australian school students about their lives and their personal objectives and intentions, especially in regard of higher education. In keeping with the responsibilities of the Higher Education Council for advising government on access for designated equity groups to higher education, the project has focused on senior school students at or near the point of eligibility for higher education. Year 10 students have been included, since educational aspirations and intentions are expected to be forming, or formed, during the middle secondary years.

The major component of the research is a survey of a targeted sample of urban/rural/isolated and low/medium/high SES Year 10-12 students in three states, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. The quantitative data are complemented by focus group interviews conducted in rural and isolated schools in two of these states, Victoria and Western Australia.

The Approach to Measuring Socioeconomic Background and Location

In framing the study and defining student subgroups for data analysis, the principal assumption has been that the disadvantage of rural and isolated people may be the effect of three interrelated factors, which, individually or in combination, may limit aspirations or access to higher education. These are listed below.

1. **socioeconomic background**, including family expectations and support, and knowledge of higher education options. This factor is measured in the study by highest level of parental education. This was chosen as a measure of socioeconomic background, as it was believed to be an appropriate indicator of the likely encouragement and commitment of families to their children's education. The SES variable allows the study to define three subgroups as follows.

    - *Lower SES* — parents did not attend school, attended primary school, or attended some secondary school
    - *Medium SES* — parents completed secondary school and/or vocational qualification, diploma or associate diploma (e.g. TAFE)
    - *Higher SES* — parents completed a university degree

2. physical **access**, that is the distance from home to a university campus, measured by self-reported distance of permanent place of residence to the nearest campus (Western et al 1998); and

3. **community context**, which includes the local social, cultural and economic context of young people, such as community perceptions of the relevance of higher education to life and employment, the range and level of local employment possibilities, and the relationship between university education and employment opportunities. This factor is measured in the study using the ABS postcode classification of geographical areas.

The last two factors are concerned with **location**. The latter, community context, is included on the assumption that student attitudes towards the relevance, attractiveness and attainability of higher education may be related significantly to the social, economic and cultural differences that exist between urban and rural areas. It has been assumed therefore that imbalances in urban and rural higher education participation rates are influenced not only by students'

household socioeconomic circumstances and their physical access to a campus, but also by the characteristics of the wider community environment in which they are living.

Together, the two location variables allow the study to define the following four student subgroups for comparative analyses, using in part the access classifications proposed by Western et al (1998).

- *Low access* — more than 300 kilometres to a university
- *Medium access* — 151-300 kilometres to a university
- *High access/rural* — less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as rural
- *High access/urban* — less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as urban

Using this categorisation, low and medium access students are necessarily rural students, and urban students must be high access. The low access subgroup in the study's sample is predominantly students classified as isolated by their home postcode, and for practical purposes low access is equated with isolation for the purposes of the report.

These groupings allow the analysis to take into account possible effects of rural or urban community contexts (by comparing the high access/urban subgroup with the other three subgroups) and possible effects of differences in physical access (by comparing the low and medium access subgroups with the two high access subgroups).

The decision to divide the dataset in this way for analysis was wholly supported by the empirical findings. The research reveals significant differences between the subgroups and some consistent patterns of variation. In particular, the high access/rural and high access/urban students differ quite substantially in their attitudes — apparently due to differences in community context and to rural students having 'high access' to possibly only one campus in comparison with many for most urban students.

The mean scores reported for the 'medium access' student category show some unexpected fluctuations. These means are influenced by the unusual composition of this group compared with the sample overall. The medium access group contains a lower proportion of males (male/female ratio of 0.58 compared with 0.73 overall) and a slightly lower proportion of Year 10 students.

The Conceptual Framework

Higher education participation and the factors influencing participation are research issues that have been the subject of some scrutiny. A number of studies related to higher education participation have been conducted since the early 1980s, including Williams et al (1980), Elsworth et al (1982), Carpenter and Western (1989), Wyn and Lamb (1990) and Dwyer (1997).

Related studies have focused on the formation of educational aspirations and decisions about higher education. These include Williams et al (1980), Lamb (1996), Elsworth et al (1982) Carpenter and Western (1984), Hayden and Carpenter (1990) and DEET (1993). Broadly speaking, these studies have proposed that attitudes towards higher education are shaped by psycho-social, socioeconomic and personal factors. Carpenter and Western (1984), for instance, hypothesise a causal ordering of the variables influencing student choice and opportunities for access to higher education, which eventually lead to higher education entrance:

1. social origins (sex, parental occupation, geographical location, perceived family income, area wealth);
2. schooling (type of school, interest in school);
3. influence of significant others (perception of parental influence, perception of teacher influence, friends' plans);
4. higher education and academic self-assessment (opinion of own academic ability, perceived utility of higher education for later career);
5. educational aspirations (plans for education beyond Year 12); and
6. academic achievement (final school academic results).

Drawing on these previous studies, the conceptual framework for the present research (figure 3.1) presupposes that decisions about higher education are influenced by a complex range of interrelated factors including family expectations and support, the range and level of local employment opportunities, perceptions of one's abilities and talents, images of university life, degree of familiarity with the higher education system and alternatives, income levels, and perceptions of costs and cost benefits. The project also explored the possibility that student choice is constrained by the characteristics of some schools, such as restricted curricula.

Conceptual Framework			
1. Current hopes, expectations and specific intentions Perceived factors influencing present thinking.	2a. General aspirations and beliefs (about life and career) 2b. Aspirations and beliefs about school 2c. Aspirations and beliefs about higher education and alternatives * Perceived attractiveness (intrinsic/ extrinsic benefits) * Perceived attainability	3. Influences, including Family School Community. Information about higher education.	4. Personal context Personal background and present context. Socio-economic background, type of schooling, geographical location.

Figure 3.1 Framework for Factors Influencing Student Choice

As figure 3.1 indicates, the research framework begins with the current hopes, expectations and intentions of prospective students in relation to their immediate post-school choices. It then establishes a multi-dimensional context for these choices. The first dimension involves broader aspirations and beliefs, starting from the most general (life and career) and moving to the particular (higher education and other post-secondary education options). Perceptions of higher education are grouped under the discrete concepts of attractiveness and attainability. The influence of changing higher education delivery patterns and opportunities as a result of advances in information technologies and on-line courses is included in this dimension.

The second dimension entails the influence of others – family, school and community — in the formation of choices and their role in providing information about educational opportunities. The final dimension is the student's

personal context: socioeconomic background, sex, language background, type of schooling, amount of part-time work, living arrangements and geographical location.

Using this framework, an eight page questionnaire was developed using Likert scale items and successfully trialed in three schools.

The Survey and Focus Group Interviews

To take account of national diversity, the survey sample was selected from three states, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Full details are provided in appendix 2.

Where Board of Studies student databases provided appropriate details, questionnaires were mailed directly to student homes. The sample was stratified by gender and by location and socioeconomic status using postcode indices. Questionnaires were also distributed to a sample of schools, selected on the basis of school type, size and postcode region. In total, 17 000 questionnaires were distributed, 8000 mailed directly to students' homes and 9000 distributed to schools.

It was not an objective of the sampling to prepare a sample representative of the national student population. Rather, the goal was to ensure that the data set would be large and diverse enough to allow for appropriate subgroup comparisons according to variables of location and socioeconomic background. As table 3.1 in the following section indicates, this objective was largely achieved, though the medium access subgroup is smaller than the others.

To complement the survey information, the project team sought a richer picture of student attitudes by conducting focus group interviews in selected rural schools. Interviews were conducted with 350 students in 20 schools in rural and remote locations in Victorian and Western Australia. The interview schedules for the focus groups were based on the conceptual framework used for the survey but focused on eliciting the relative importance that students attribute to contributing factors in their decisions about post-secondary education and training.

Patterns of Response to the Survey

From the 17 000 questionnaires distributed, 7593 responses were received. After incomplete questionnaires were put aside, 7023 responses were useable. As table 3.1 on the following page shows, the project's sampling strategy and student response patterns generated location/SES cells which are sufficiently large to permit confident comparative analysis.

The survey received a lower response rate from males (see appendix 3). The pattern of lower male response was strongest in the lower socioeconomic subgroup. Given that the gender variations in response rate tended to follow a clear pattern across the subgroups (see appendix 3), an analysis by gender was conducted to determine the possible impact of gender imbalance in the dataset. In later analyses by socioeconomic background and location, the gender variable was included (see next section).

Since the high access category includes students whose residence is within 150 km of a university campus, as recommended by Western et al (1998), one concern for the project was the distribution of distances within this range, assuming that distances upwards of 150 km might still have an inhibiting effect on student decision-making. The survey therefore sought more detail and asked students to nominate whether the closest campus was less than 25 km, 26-100 km, or 101-150 km away. Of the students in the sample classified as high access/ rural, 59.5 per cent live close to a university, within 25 km.

Table 3.1 *Number of Useable Responses, by Respondent Socioeconomic Background and Location*

LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Rural	Low access (300+km to a univ.)	376	580	323	1279
	Medium access (151-300 km)	127	199	111	437
	High access/rural (0-150 km)	491	862	641	1994
Urban	High access/urban (0-150 km)	811	1386	1116	3313
All		1805	3027	2191	7023

Analysis and Presentation of Survey Data

The principal aim of the statistical analysis was to explore similarities and contrasts by students' location and socioeconomic status in their responses to scale variables on the questionnaire. Mean scores for questionnaire items have therefore been tabulated for four location subgroups and three SES subgroups throughout the report. As a consequence, the tables contain considerable data which require careful interpretation. In choosing to present the data in this way

rather than to reduce it, we were swayed by the objective of preserving a full impression of the effects of the intersection of location and socioeconomic status. Figure 4.1 in the following chapter is a guide to interpreting the tables.

Since gender and year level were also anticipated influences and the student sample has some unevenness in the composition of location/SES subgroups, Manova tests were conducted using a model which contained four variables: location, SES, gender and year (10 or 11/12). Wherever one or more of these independent variables account for observed variation in a questionnaire item to an extent that is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), these variables are highlighted in the tables. A summary of the major gender and year level differences is presented in the following section.

Chapters 4, 5 and 9 present tables summarising the major subgroup variations in student attitudes. Some discretion has been used in preparing these tables. Student subgroups have been highlighted only where there are statistically significant differences according to the variable concerned and the trends between the subgroups appear unambiguous.

Summary of Major Gender and Year Level Differences

Year 10 Students

The attitudes and aspirations of the Year 10 students in this study appear idealistic yet confused and paradoxical. They appear more interested in learning for its own sake than their older peers, while at the same time they attach a higher priority to earning money, having a high-status career, and finding a job that uses their talents; everything is still possible it would seem. The point at which trade-offs in one's ambitions or prospects must be faced still lies ahead for many Year 10 students. In contrast, Year 11 and 12 students are more pragmatic in their objectives and assessments of what is possible for them.

Despite this overall picture, among the Year 10 students are a group of young people who have already made firm decisions to leave school as soon as possible — the post-school directions are setting, or are set, for a sizeable group of Year 10 students, though the actual decision-points may come later. The presence of this Year 10 subgroup tends to distort the aggregrate means for Year 10 students overall — so much so that Year 10 students were more likely than Year 11 or 12 students to report they were only staying at school because their parents wanted them to, and that any years spent at university would delay the hunt for a job. Evidence of further disillusionment with education in the middle secondary years, and perhaps of the impact of disaffection on the school environment, is apparent in the finding that Year 10 students are more likely than students in the later years to report that their friends are not interested in school.

Gender Differences

The differences between young women and men in attitudes, aspirations and plans are striking, but not unexpected, given the growing evidence of the alienation and disaffection of many adolescent males in the community. This study provides further evidence of this trend, although many of the differences between male and female respondents are modest. The relatively poor response rate from males may suggest that some of the most disaffected youths have been missed in this survey, as they would be less likely to complete the questionnaire.

Proportionately more young women in the survey indicate that attending university is their preferred activity and their actual intention. Girls are more interested than boys in doing well at school and completing Year 12, while boys give a higher priority than girls to earning money, being involved in sport, and pursuing hobbies and personal interests. When they consider their priorities for the future, girls tend to place greater value than boys on learning and understanding more about the world, making a contribution to society, being close to families and having opportunities to travel, while boys place more importance than girls on making a good deal of money and meeting the expectations of family.

The students' views of schooling confirm an impression of boys who are less motivated, less engaged and more likely to be at school because their parents want them to be or because there are no jobs available. Their friends are also less likely to be interested in school. The girls, on the other hand, indicate a stronger desire to do well at school and belief that it will help them achieve what they want in life, greater satisfaction in study and enjoyment of school. They are also more likely to discuss their school work with members of their families.

The tendency for males to express more cynical and instrumental views is also apparent in their attitudes towards university. They are more likely to agree that you learn more on the job than in a classroom or from books, that university is a way of delaying the hunt for a job, and that universities are for wealthy people. In terms of their own choices, they are more likely to be considering university because of a lack of jobs, and to indicate that they want to start earning money immediately, that a degree is not necessary for the job they want and that they don't see any point in going to university.

Girls are more idealistic and enthusiastic: they are more likely to believe that life at university sounds exciting, that it gives you a chance to meet interesting people and broadens your outlook on life. They are more inclined than boys to express interest in the subjects they could study, and to judge that university would offer the chance for an interesting and rewarding career and the opportunity to become more independent.

There are interesting gender differences in terms of relationships with others, with girls more likely to be influenced by friends, teachers and career advisers. More of them also indicate that teachers and parents have encouraged them to aim for university, and that most of their friends will be going. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to believe that they would lose touch with their friends if they went to university. The hint of vulnerability underlying the cynicism in this last response is strengthened by the fact that males are more likely to agree that universities are big and unfriendly places.

4

'When I leave school ... ': The Goals and Hopes of Young Australians

Chapters 4 to 8 present the study's survey findings as an analysis by location and socioeconomic background. The analysis is conducted on the aggregate responses of Year 10, 11 and 12 students in three states. Findings from focus group interviews that extend or shed light on the survey findings are interwoven throughout the discussion. Following these chapters, chapter 9 summarises the major findings of the study.

Preferred Activity When Leaving School

The questionnaire asked students to nominate what they would prefer to do when they leave secondary school, assuming there were no constraints. Their preferences vary considerably, mostly according to their socio-economic background (table 4.1) but also according to location (table 4.2). The patterns of preference show obvious divides between lower, medium and higher SES subgroups in the extent to which university is a goal, and smaller but discernible differences between urban and rural students.

Table 4.1 *Preferred Activity When Leaving School, by Socioeconomic Background (Per cent)*

	Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Study full-time at university	41.0	47.1	65.0	51.1
Study part-time at university while working	11.9	12.2	11.8	12.0
Subtotal	**52.9**	**59.3**	**76.8**	**63.1**
Study full-time at a TAFE college	11.5	10.3	5.8	9.2
Study part-time at TAFE while working	11.9	10.0	4.8	8.9
Work in family business	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.7
Take an apprenticeship	10.2	8.5	3.6	7.4
Work in a full-time job	8.8	7.0	3.2	6.3
Other	3.9	4.1	5.3	4.4
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have a much stronger preference for university study, with almost two-thirds of students in that group having a preference for full-time university study. Combined with those who prefer to study at university while working part-time, more than three-quarters of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have a preference for university study once schooling is completed. This proportion contrasts sharply with the barely 60 per cent of students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds, and slightly less than 53 per cent of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who express a preference to attend university in either a full-time or part-time capacity.

Perhaps unexpectedly, there are few differences between socioeconomic groups regarding their preference for working part-time and studying, with approximately 12 per cent of each of the socioeconomic groups citing part-time university study as their preferred option after secondary school. As discussed in chapter 6, students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to expect they will be supporting themselves financially if they go to university, and the cost of attending university does appear to be an inhibiting factor for these students. Given this, it is surprising that a higher proportion of students from lower and medium SES backgrounds do not consider part-time study in conjunction with paid employment to be a preferred option.

TAFE study is seen as a less desirable option by all socioeconomic subgroups, but is a much stronger preference for students from lower and medium SES backgrounds relative to higher SES students. Compared with the higher SES subgroup, twice the proportion of lower SES students nominate a preference to attend a TAFE college after completing school. This difference probably reflects the composite effect of a number of interrelated variables: the differing entry requirements to TAFE colleges compared with university; the alternative school subjects required for entry to those two forms of post-secondary study; the differences in the cost of study; and the view of some students that a university qualification may be unnecessary for the type of employment they seek.

Similar clear differences exist between students from higher SES and lower/ medium SES backgrounds with regard to the options of taking an apprenticeship or working in full-time employment. Compared with higher SES students, approximately three times the proportion of lower, and twice the proportion of medium, SES students have a preference for either of these activities after completing school. More than one in five lower SES students indicate full-time work or an apprenticeship as preferred activities, compared with less than seven per cent of higher SES students.

These marked differences between socioeconomic groups regarding preference for university may in part be due to the opportunity cost of attending university. That is, it is the money that will be foregone for potentially employable family members that may be an important factor in the lower university participation of lower SES families. This conclusion is supported by the higher proportions of

lower and medium SES students seeking apprenticeships or full-time employment, where money coming into the household from those activities may be essential. Further, the expectations of students and their parents about what is a necessary or appropriate education differ according to socioeconomic background. Findings on these influences are reported in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Table 4.2 Preferred Activity When Leaving School, by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			***URBAN***	***All***
	Low access	***Medium access***	***High access / rural***	***High access / urban***	
Study full-time at university	46.0	53.4	49.6	54.5	51.1
Study part-time at university while working	9.0	9.4	11.6	13.5	12.0
Subtotal	**55.0**	**62.8**	**61.2**	**68.0**	**63.1**
Study full-time at a TAFE college	11.7	8.7	7.5	8.8	9.2
Study part-time at TAFE while working	9.6	7.5	7.9	8.8	8.9
Work in family business	1.2	0.5	0.9	0.3	0.7
Take an apprenticeship	10.7	10.0	9.6	4.7	7.4
Work in a full-time job	8.3	6.8	7.2	4.9	6.3
Other	3.4	3.7	5.7	4.4	4.4
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Turning to the influence of students' locations on their post-school preferences, as table 4.2 shows, rural students are less likely to express a preference for attending university than urban students, although the differences on this dimension are not as strong as the differences according to socioeconomic background. The location effect is produced by both access and rural/urban context differences, with 55 per cent of students in the low access rural group indicating a preference for attending university either full-time or part-time, compared with approximately 62 per cent of medium/high access rural students and 68 per cent of urban students.

No clear differences emerge between the proportions of rural or urban students who would like to pursue TAFE studies, except in the low access rural group. Students in this group have a stronger tendency towards TAFE than all other rural or urban groups, with a total of 21 per cent indicating a preference for either full-

Interpreting the Report's Tables

The Subgroups

Location subgroupings are based on students' self-reported distance from a university and the classification of the postcode of their permanent home address.

Low access	more than 300 kilometres to a university
Medium access	151-300 kilometres to a university
High access/rural	less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as rural
High access/urban	less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as urban

Categories of **socioeconomic background** are based on the education level of the parent with highest level of education.

Lower SE	did not attend school, attended primary school, or attended some secondary school
Medium SES	completed secondary school and/or vocational qualification, diploma or associate diploma (e.g TAFE)
Higher SES	university degree

The Scales

Means are reported for five-point scales. The scales are variously labelled in the 'When I leave school ... ' questionnaire, but generally students were asked to respond on a Likert scale on which 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

Item means on a five-point scale that fall in the vicinity of 4.0 or above signify very high levels of overall agreement among the respondents. Means of 2.0 or below indicate very low levels of agreement.

Where statistically significant differences are found between socioeconomic subgroups or location subgroups on a Manova test ($p < 0.01$), these groups are underlined.

Because of the nature of the Manova test, there is no simple benchmark to indicate whether an observed difference in means between two student subgroups is statistically significant or not. However, as a rule of thumb, differences between subgroups means of 0.1-0.2 tend to be statistically significant. Differences above 0.2 are almost certainly statistically significant. Many of the contrasts in student attitudes that have been identified by this study could be considered large in terms of social science research of this kind.

Figure 4.1 Guide to Interpreting the Tables of the Report

time or part-time TAFE study. This stronger preference for TAFE may be due in part to the presence of TAFE colleges either in, or in close proximity to more remote rural towns, so that students may be able to attend those TAFE colleges without the costs and personal stresses associated with relocation.

The differences that emerged between higher and lower/medium SES students with regard to both taking an apprenticeship and working in a full-time job are also evident in the effects of location on students' preference after completing schooling. Rural students are much more likely to wish either to take on an apprenticeship or work full-time than are students from urban backgrounds. The focus groups with rural students also revealed that these are taken-for-granted 'pathways' for boys and young men — if they can find them. As discussed in the chapter to follow, rural students are more likely to say they are only staying at school because there are no jobs available.

The proportion of rural students who would prefer to work in the family business is much higher than for urban students, though the overall number of students indicating this preference is low. The focus groups revealed that young men appear far more likely to consider taking a role in the family business. However, in some rural areas, because of structural and economic change, sometimes combined with environmental issues, families who have traditionally lived on the land are encouraging their children to take up other options. This was especially so in the Western District of Victoria, where students made comments such as 'you will find that not many people want to be farmers' and 'parents push and encourage us to leave the farm, they see it as a last resort, they can see that it is going down'.

Confidence in Pursuing Main Preference

Most students are confident of their ability to pursue their first preference for life after school (table 4.3), with the mean score for all students being greater than 4.0. Seventy-three per cent of all respondents indicated they were reasonably confident or very confident of pursuing their first preference. The focus group interviews also found that students were largely very sure about achieving their 'next move'.

Table 4.3 Confidence in Ability to Pursue First Preference for Life After School

Overall mean = 4.02 on scale 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	3.92	3.96	4.11	3.99
	Medium access	3.93	4.08	4.25	4.07
	High access/rural	3.95	3.92	4.14	4.00
Urban	High access/urban	3.90	4.05	4.13	4.04
All		3.92	3.99	4.14	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

While all groups of students demonstrate a high level of confidence in pursuing their choice of activity after schooling, significant differences exist between the different socioeconomic groups, but not between urban and rural subgroups, or between rural subgroups with different levels of access.

For those students hoping to go to higher education, their confidence may be somewhat at odds with the actual proportions of students who are successful in gaining entry to university. Some students may hold unrealistic expectations about their academic results, or be poorly informed about entrance requirements. On the other hand, when students report what they actually intend to do, rather than what they would prefer to do, as is discussed in chapter 6, there is a sizeable drop in the number who expect to go on to university, perhaps indicating a more considered assessment of their actual prospects.

Current Priorities

The current priorities of students show that the vast majority of students, from all socioeconomic groups, and from both rural and urban backgrounds, are keen to succeed at school and to finish Year 12. The two items relating to schooling are given the highest priority by all subgroups, with very high mean scores – 4.45 for 'doing well at school' and 4.60 for 'going through and completing Year 12' (table 4.4). In all, 75 per cent of students indicate that the latter goal is a very high priority for them. On this item, there are small statistically significant differences

according to SES and location (in terms of both access and rural/urban context), with the lowest priority rating being given by lower SES/low access /rural students and the highest by higher SES/high access/urban students.

Table 4.4 Priority Attached to 'Going Through and Completing Year 12'

Overall mean = 4.60 on scale 1 (not a priority at all) to 5 (very high priority)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	4.42	4.49	4.62	4.49
Rural	Medium access	4.61	4.66	4.71	4.65
	High access/rural	4.50	4.55	4.70	4.58
Urban	High access/urban	4.64	4.64	4.70	4.66
All		**4.54**	**4.59**	**4.68**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Earning money is a lower current priority for all subgroups of students than other pursuits, with the exception of being involved in sport. There are differences according to SES in the importance placed by students on earning money, with lower SES students giving a higher priority to this objective than medium or higher SES students.

The focus group interviews suggest that many rural students, understandably, place a high priority on gaining a secure income. Getting a job was uppermost in the minds of most students, although those who were intending to go to university were more likely to take a longer term view, and to value education for its own sake. As one student commented: 'Having a particular job in mind is not as important as education in helping to get a job in the general sense' (Northern WA).

Table 4.5 Priority Attached to 'Being Involved in Sport'

Overall mean = 3.10 on scale 1 (not a priority at all) to 5 (very high priority)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.21	3.28	3.24	3.26
Rural	Medium access	2.94	3.23	3.44	3.20
	High access/rural	3.07	3.20	3.24	3.18
Urban	High access/urban	2.90	3.02	2.93	2.96
All		**3.01**	**3.13**	**3.10**	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

A modest but statistically significant difference exists between rural and urban groups in students' perceptions of the importance of playing sport (table 4.5). This is largely an urban/rural context effect, relating to factors associated with the local social context of young people within the community. Sporting activities may be a more important part of the culture of rural communities, and may figure in some students' thinking about whether or not they wish to relocate in order to attend university. On the other hand, some young people interviewed were scathing about the role of organised sport in country towns, and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to leave the 'footy culture' behind. One young man from Wodonga said 'If this town caters to your social needs it's OK. If you're not into football and drinking beer, it's hard to get on here'. His friend added 'It's hard to get a job too, if you're not into footy'.

Students from all groups are keen to learn about things that interest them, with no significant differences according to either location or socioeconomic background. Overall, despite a few small differences according to SES and location, the strong impression which emerges from responses to this and other questionnaire items on general aspirations and goals is that the students surveyed are remarkably similar in their priorities and interests.

The Future

Students across all location and socioeconomic groups place considerable importance for the future on working in an area of employment that interests them, earning a reasonable income, having good friendships, having a steady job, having fun, and finding a job which uses their talents and abilities. No substantial differences emerge between groups for these items, except that lower SES students place more importance on having a steady job than do other students.

The importance of status in students' careers after schooling is perceived differently by rural and urban groups. Urban students are more likely to view career status as important. A clear trend across the focus groups, in both Western Australia and Victoria, was for young people who were not aiming for the higher education pathway to have modest career goals. When asked what they would like to be doing in the future, the Year 11 students at an outback Western Australian High School made comments such as 'a job you don't hate', 'a job you enjoy, and pays well', 'not have people bossing me around', and 'a laid back job'. They believed that it was likely that 'maybe people will end up doing something less than they want to do'. Year 11 students in a small Victorian town also expressed relatively conservative career aspirations ('small business somewhere', 'primary school teacher', 'work in the police force in a small town') and placed considerable emphasis on the importance of relationships in their priorities for the future.

As table 4.6 indicates, students' consideration of the importance of having their family around them in the future varies according to location. Rural students do not consider this factor as important as do urban students, which may indicate that some rural students are keen on, or reconciled to, leaving home for a different lifestyle in the city. The sub-group which places most importance on having their families around them is the lower SES/urban group. It is possible that there is some effect from ethnicity in this result – perhaps recent immigrant groups place a greater emphasis on family solidarity.

All students place less importance on 'learning and understanding more of the world in the future' than other possible priorities. Within SES groups, lower SES students are less likely than medium or higher SES students to think of this as important.

Table 4.6 Importance for Future of 'Having My Family Around Me'

Overall mean = 3.97 on scale 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	3.82	3.82	3.86	3.83
	Medium access	3.69	3.82	3.70	3.76
	High access/rural	4.03	3.89	3.76	3.88
Urban	High access/urban	4.25	4.11	3.95	4.09
All		4.06	3.98	3.87	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Meeting family expectations is viewed by all students as a lower priority, with this item having a mean score of 3.14 (table 4.7). Only 13 per cent of students overall saw this as a very important priority. Differences between SES groups are significant, however, and urban students rate this as slightly more important than do rural subgroups. Within those rural subgroups, no clear trend by degree of access emerges, suggesting a predominantly community context effect. Lower SES students appear to place slightly more importance on 'living in a good community' than do other SES groups, but the differences are not statistically significant. Responses to this item do not seem to be affected by location.

Table 4.7 Importance for Future of 'Meeting the Expectations of My Family'

Overall mean = 3.14 on scale 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.10	3.14	3.06	3.10
Rural	Medium access	3.06	3.14	3.18	3.14
	High access/rural	3.08	3.04	2.96	3.03
Urban	High access/urban	3.33	3.26	3.10	3.22
All		3.21	3.17	3.06	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Table 4.8 Importance for Future of 'Making a Good Deal of Money'

Overall mean = 3.78 on scale 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.80	3.78	3.68	3.77
Rural	Medium access	3.63	3.74	3.86	3.74
	High access/rural	3.71	3.75	3.57	3.68
Urban	High access/urban	3.92	3.91	3.72	3.85
All		3.83	3.83	3.69	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

While students place relatively minor emphasis on earning money as a current priority, as discussed above, future income earning ability is considered somewhat more important (with a mean importance rating of 3.78) (table 4.8). No statistical differences according to socioeconomic background occur with regard to the importance of making a good deal of money in the future. Rural students generally rate this consideration as less important than do urban students.

The Importance of Others in Future Planning

As might be expected, parents are considered to be the most important source of advice to students in assisting them to plan their futures, with mothers having more influence than fathers. Siblings and best friends provide some input, but their advice is not as important as that of parents. No statistically significant differences between groups are evident in responses to these questions.

The advice of teachers and career advisers is viewed as more important than that given by students' other friends and other family members. Small differences, linked to socioeconomic background, are evident in the effect of career advisers on students' planning. A pattern of lower SES students placing more emphasis than higher SES students on the advice of career advisers is evident, regardless of location, as table 4.9 shows.

Lower SES students also place more importance than medium/higher SES students on the advice of other family members and other friends. Since lower SES students have parents with lower educational levels, it is not surprising that they are somewhat more inclined to seek advice from others, in addition to their parents; nevertheless, the differences between sub-groups are small.

Table 4.9 Importance of Views and Advice of Careers Advisers

Overall mean = 3.30 on scale 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.41	3.27	3.29	3.31
Rural	Medium access	3.50	3.43	3.17	3.39
	High access/rural	3.38	3.39	3.21	3.33
Urban	High access/urban	3.38	3.32	3.10	3.26
All		3.40	3.35	3.17	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of year level is also significant

Summary

The dominant impression from the findings presented in this chapter is one of similarity between student subgroups in their general aspirations for their lives and careers. However, some differences do emerge. Tables 4.10 and 4.11 highlight these variations, where they exist, by identifying the student subgroups whose mean responses are in most agreement with each statement. Some discretion has been used in preparing these tables. Student subgroups have been highlighted only where there are statistically significant differences according to the variable concerned and the trends between the subgroups appear unambiguous.

Overall, lower SES students seem somewhat more concerned with job security and less with the inherent interest of further learning, and to be more inclined to want to meet parental and family expectations. Urban students place more emphasis than rural students on having high-status careers and on making a good deal of money; they are also more concerned with having their families around them and meeting the expectations of their parents and families.

These differences between student subgroups, while significant, are not large. Substantial differences in student outlook only emerge when respondents are asked to focus more specifically on their thinking about their immediate future and the place of education in these plans, as the chapter to follow shows.

Table 4.10 Student Subgroups Attaching Greatest Importance to Future Goals

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	LOCATION	
		ACCESS	COMMUNITY CONTEXT
	L = lower SES H = higher SES	LA = low access HA = high access	R = rural U = urban
Working in employment that interests me	•	•	•
Finding a job that uses my talents and abilities	•	•	•
Having a high-status career	•	•	U*
Having a steady job	L	•	•
Earning a reasonable income	•	•	•
Making a good deal of money	•	•	U
Learning and understanding more about the world	H	•	•
Making a contribution to society	•	•	•
Having my family around me	•	•	U
Meeting the expectations of my parents and family	L	•	U
Living in a good community	•	•	•
Having good friendships	•	•	•
Having fun	•	•	•
Having opportunities for travel	•	•	•

EXAMPLE
- • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
- *U* = *urban subgroup attaching significantly greater importance than rural subgroup*
- *U** = *urban subgroup attaching much greater importance than rural subgroup*

Table 4.11 Student Subgroups Attaching Highest Priority to Goal Statements

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	LOCATION	
		ACCESS	COMMUNITY CONTEXT
	L = lower SES H = higher SES	LA = low access HA = high access	R = rural U = urban
Doing well at school	•	•	•
Going through and completing Year 12	H	HA	U
Learning about things that interest me	•	•	•
Earning money	L	•	•
Being involved in sport	•	•	R
Enjoying a social life	•	•	•
Pursuing hobbies and personal interests	•	•	•

EXAMPLE • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
R = rural subgroup attaching significantly higher priority than urban subgroup

5

Personal Contexts and Educational Aspirations

You can read all about uni, but in the country you don't get to live it.
(Student in the South-West of Western Australia)

One of the principal findings of this study, reinforcing earlier research, is that while young people's general aspirations and priorities tend to be similar across class and location, their attitudes towards school, and especially towards the possibility of further study after school, are influenced by their immediate family context and the community in which they live. This chapter examines students' views about school, including their level of commitment to education, and their opinions nearing completion of school about higher education.

Urban and Rural Australia: Contrasts in Opportunities and Outlooks

Young people in 'rural Australia' live in a wide variety of economic, social and environmental contexts which influence their educational aspirations, the way they perceive educational costs, and the impact of these costs. The diversity includes the extent of rurality or remoteness, the kind of economic base and development of the region (for example, reliance on wool, mining or dairying); the effect of recent environmental forces such as drought, flood or erosion; and, importantly with regard to educational aspirations, the extent of familiarity with higher education. This diversity was reflected in the focus group discussions as the groups were selected to cover a range of different regional contexts.

The local economy affects students' thinking about higher education in several ways. For example, in the Victorian Western District, formerly wealthy families whose livelihood depended on the wool industry are currently facing the downturn in wool prices. There is less income for families to support their young people in higher education, but on the other hand, there is also a perception that the local economy will not provide a livelihood in the future, and so education is a pathway to an alternative future. However, in mining towns such as the Pilbara Region of Western Australia, there is a perception that the local economy will continue to provide jobs with a relatively attractive level of income. Higher education is not seen as necessary to establishing a livelihood.

In many communities there is a tradition going back several generations for the young people to be educated in urban areas and for the education to include higher education. This may be so established as to involve links with particular

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universities (for example, tracking to the University of Melbourne from Hamilton or to LaTrobe University from Wodonga). However, for other students, they may be the first in their family to have completed Year 12, and they face the transition to higher education with little understanding of how this is managed at a practical level ('where do I live?', 'how much time will I have for a part-time job?') and an ambivalence about the longer term worth of the sacrifice they and their families will have to make ('graduates don't necessarily get the jobs.').

Being at School

On the evidence of this large sample, Australian students in the upper secondary years of 10, 11 and 12 have a strong desire to achieve success at school that cuts across social strata and geographical location.

As reported in the previous chapter, the subgroup means for the item 'I really want to do well at school' are all high, falling in the range 4.42 - 4.62, indicating overwhelming agreement with the statement and considerable consistency across all subgroups. The focus group interviews strongly support this finding. Students were emphatic about the importance of school, regardless of their goals. For many, doing well at school was equated with 'finishing Year 12':

> No one is going to hire you if you haven't finished Year 12. To get any sort of skilled job, Year 12 is a minimum. (Eastern Pilbara region of WA, secondary school)

> It's worthwhile finishing school to Year 12 because you can't get jobs if you leave at Year 10. (Northern WA, secondary school)

> Even non-TEE students stay on at school, unless they have an apprenticeship to go to. (South West of WA, secondary school)

> You stay at school to get jobs or to go to uni. You need a uni degree or Year 12 to get a job. (South Western District, Victoria, boarding school)

> You want a decent job, you gotta stay at school and go to uni or TAFE. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, Regional town, senior high school)

Other questionnaire items that gauged students' level of motivation, interest, or satisfaction with school, also show only slight variations between the subgroups. One exception is the responses to the statement 'I am happy to get by with the bare minimum of work'. Although there are statistically significant differences

between both socioeconomic and location subgroups, the socioeconomic differences are more substantial and follow a clearer pattern. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to agree with this statement, especially those in low access areas.

More substantial differences between student attitudes tend only to be revealed in the degree of certainty and security they feel about their futures. While most students are reasonably sure that school will in some way help them get what they want out of life, some students are equally attracted to employment. As table 5.1 indicates, a significant number of students, particularly those in low access locations or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, concede that school is just 'filling in time' until they decide what to do with their lives. It should be kept in mind, however, that this group is still a minority, even among the lower SES/low access students.

Table 5.1 Extent of Agreement with 'Being at School is Just Filling In Time'

Overall mean = 2.07 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	2.26	2.13	2.10	2.17
Rural	Medium access	2.04	1.85	1.82	1.90
	High access/rural	2.08	2.03	1.93	2.01
Urban	High access/urban	2.09	2.09	2.05	2.08
All		2.13	2.07	2.02	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

The clearest differences emerge between rural and urban students in their responses to the statement 'I'm only staying at school because there are no jobs available' (table 5.2). While the respondents overall generally did not agree with this statement, those from rural communities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to do so.
Rural students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds appear considerably more inclined to leave school to take up available employment than their peers. In particular, rural students who wish to continue living in their area may be especially alert to 'snapping up' employment opportunities. The focus

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group interviews confirm this, while also providing evidence that such an inclination is very dependent on perceptions of the local economy. Typical student comments were 'if you get offered an apprenticeship, you'd probably leave' and 'people with apprenticeships are well off. If I was a male I would like to have an apprenticeship' (both students in Northern Victoria). Employers often know that positions will be quickly taken up and will contact schools in order to fill job vacancies: 'Up here they ring the principal, they don't advertise' (Northern Victoria).

Table 5.2 *Extent of Agreement with 'I'm Only Staying at School Because there are No Jobs Available'*

Overall mean = 1.55 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	1.82	1.69	1.46	1.68
	Medium access	1.71	1.48	1.41	1.54
	High access/rural	1.79	1.65	1.43	1.61
Urban	High access/urban	1.55	1.45	1.40	1.46
All		1.69	1.55	1.42	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

The focus groups also suggest that boys are more likely to leave school for a job in their local area:

> It is mainly boys who leave school before Year 12. A small percentage go because they can't handle school. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, regional senior high school)

> All the girls have stayed, there are only nine males left in Year 12 (Greater North Eastern Region of Victoria, regional secondary school)

> The gender breakdown in Year 11 is about 25 girls and only 5 males doing TEE. Most guys would rather do Instep so they can get apprenticeships. Most girls in Year 11 want to go to university. (Eastern Pilbara Region of WA, senior high school)

Parental Influences

The extent to which parents are interested in their children's school achievement and discuss school work with them can be expected to have a significant effect in shaping young people's beliefs about the relevance of education. Clear variations in students' perceptions of their parents' attitudes and the apparent influence of these have been found in this study.

While there was a generally low level of agreement with the statement 'I'm only staying at school because my parents want me to' (table 5.3), students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and low access areas were more likely to agree. These differences may be due to variations in students' personal objectives, though equally plausibly they may be evidence of some parents displaying anxiety about the future in rural communities, and viewing education as an important buffer against future uncertainties.

Table 5.3 *Extent of Agreement with 'I'm Only Studying at School Because My Parents Want Me To'*

Overall mean = 1.68 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
	Low access	1.85	1.79	1.65	**1.78**
Rural	Medium access	1.71	1.51	1.59	**1.60**
	High access/rural	1.70	1.67	1.53	**1.63**
Urban	High access/urban	1.74	1.65	1.62	**1.66**
All		**1.76**	**1.68**	**1.61**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Two other items that probed the level of encouragement and dialogue between students and their parents and other family members, 'My parents encourage me do well at school' and 'I often discuss my school work with members of my family', show significant and consistent patterns. In both cases, student location has little apparent effect but the level of both perceived encouragement and discussion rises according to socioeconomic status.

Since the variable measuring socioeconomic background for this research is measured on parental education levels, it could be speculated that parents in lower SES families might lack confidence rather than interest in discussing school work with their children in their senior secondary years. It should be noted, however, that the level of agreement with the statement 'My parents encourage me to do well at school' is consistently high (overall mean of 4.41), despite variations among the subgroups.

In the focus group interviews, students were asked to expand on the role their parents played in their educational aspirations. Young people confirmed that their parents' experiences, perspectives and encouragement were fundamental.

Sibling and other family members were also mentioned as important. For example, students in Year 10 at a senior high school in Eastern WA agreed that relatives' impressions of university were an important motivating factor and students at Manjimup, in the South West of WA, said that one of the most important things influencing their choice after school was 'talking to people who have been to uni or are in a particular job.' Students in other regions agreed that family experiences and views were important in providing encouragement and, in some cases, establishing constraints:

> Parents have the major influence on keeping kids at school. Brothers and sisters, if they have someone at school, they have an influence because you feel as though you should follow them. (Eastern Pilbara Region of WA, senior high school)

> Mum and Dad want me to stay here — parents hold you back. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, p-12 school)

> Parents never push TAFE, they push university. They say, if you don't work harder you won't get into uni. (Greater North Eastern Region, Victoria, secondary college)

Impressions of Life at University

The project asked students a series of questions to probe their beliefs about university life and the relevance of higher education. The responses to these question show the first sustained variations between student subgroups.

foreshadowing the large divergences between low and high SES students and urban and rural students, reported in chapters 6 and 7, on their actual decisions about the possibility of attending university.

In responses to the proposition that 'Universities are really for wealthy people', there are clear differences between SES subgroups and even larger differences between rural and urban students. Table 5.4 shows a clear difference between urban and rural responses, but little variation between the various rural locations. This pattern of responses could be interpreted as a 'university people are not like me' effect, but equally likely it may be a sign of the general assessment of rural students, reported in the chapter to follow, that attending university is an expensive business.

Table 5.4 *Extent of Agreement with 'Universities are Really for Wealthy People'*

Overall mean = 2.35 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	2.46	2.50	2.31	**2.44**
Rural	Medium access	2.66	2.48	2.24	**2.48**
	High access/rural	2.47	2.49	2.31	**2.43**
Urban	High access/urban	2.29	2.27	2.18	**2.24**
All		**2.41**	**2.38**	**2.25**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

In the focus groups, students revealed wide differences in their familiarity and 'comfort levels' about the idea of being at university. Some students in country towns were barely able to contain their enthusiasm for going to a university. They had the expectation that this would be an inevitable and highly enjoyable experience. Others believed that going to university would cast them as 'outsiders'. The sense that university was a 'different world' was most often expressed by students in Western Australia who were attending rural schools:

> We don't get university lecturers coming up and saying we should come to uni and saying it is really wonderful (Eastern Pilbara region of WA, senior high school)

> If we could sit in on a lecture and see the accommodation that would be great. (SW of WA, college)

> You don't know anyone in Perth so it makes it hard to go down there. (Eastern Pilbara region of WA, senior high school)

The sense of geographical isolation contributing to uncertainty and impotence is vividly described in the comment of a student living in the Kimberley region:

> If you are down there [in Perth] you can figure out what you are doing, where you can go, that sort of thing, whereas if you are up here you are pretty much in the dark, just on what you have heard until you are down there. (Kimberley Region, WA)

A feeling of being cut-off from things was also articulated by students in the Victorian focus groups. As one student from the Greater North Eastern Region said 'We know only all the basic things. Melbourne kids know the specifics, they know all the courses. It's easier for them to have a look around — open days — we have to travel heaps further.' Similarly, a student from WA commented 'Some people only go to Perth once or twice a year.' (Eastern Pilbara region, senior high school).

Table 5.5 *Extent of Agreement with 'Completing a University Degree is a Good Investment in the Future'*

Overall mean = 4.32 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	4.06	4.26	4.36	**4.22**
Rural	Medium access	4.34	4.38	4.42	**4.37**
	High access/rural	4.17	4.23	4.39	**4.27**
Urban	High access/urban	4.34	4.35	4.48	**4.39**
All		**4.23**	**4.30**	**4.43**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

The idea that study at university is 'just a way of delaying the hunt for a job' does not receive much support (mean 1.84). As table 5.5 indicates, students in general believe that completing a university degree 'is a good investment in the future'. This statement is strongly supported by all subgroups (overall mean of 4.32), however both SES and rurality cause variations in student responses to this item. The rurality effect appears to play a small but significant part. On the other hand, socioeconomic background is consistent in its effect: lower and medium SES students are more likely to express doubts about the benefit of time spent at university.

A similar impression of slightly more ambivalence towards higher education on the part of lower SES students emerges on other items that gauge whether or not students believe university education is worthwhile for developing skills and broadening personal outlook. For example, the responses to the statement 'You learn more on the job than you do in a classroom or from book' (table 5.6) — to which there is a soberingly high level of agreement by students overall — show a pattern of variation in which lower SES students tend to have less confidence in the relevance of learning at universities.

Table 5.6 *Extent of Agreement with 'You Learn More on the Job than You Do in a Classroom or from Books'*

Overall mean = 3.77 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
	Low access	3.85	3.77	3.68	3.77
Rural	Medium access	3.85	3.81	3.72	3.80
	High access rural	3.81	3.82	3.62	3.75
Urban	High access urban	3.89	3.79	3.68	3.78
All		3.86	3.79	3.67	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

The focus group interviews reveal complexities in the young people's understandings of the role higher education will have in their futures. Students who are vocationally and occupationally oriented place a high priority on using

education to gain entry into a specified job or occupational area. However, other young people place an equal emphasis on balancing employment, study and other life concerns, such as travel, leisure or personal relationships.

The role higher education plays in providing a form of general education with social and cultural benefits for students from rural and isolated regions of Australia needs to be recognised. While students were interested in undertaking university study because they felt that this would give them the edge in terms of employment in the future, their statements also revealed a high priority on the role of university life in social and personal development. Universities were seen as settings in which they would develop relationships, test their ability to live independently, gain a general education and develop new relationships, with their families and with others.

Hence, attending university was not necessarily justified on the grounds of employment outcomes alone. For young people in rural areas, the significance of 'going to university', socially as well as economically, can be underestimated, especially for young women. In all schools, students talked about higher education as an opportunity to leave their local area and 'grow up' in a more socially diverse setting.

The following comments from Year 12 students from Western Australia illustrate the extent to which young people's impressions of university life focus on the social aspects: 'you meet some pretty freaky people; it's relaxed and quite a bit easier than school; you drink a lot of beer'. Young people in Broome were also positive about university life: 'Love it – the lifestyle, the people, leisure time and social life; a great culture mix'. Young women attending a girls' school in Perth also emphasised the social benefits of university: 'heaps more people; the best years of your life; great times, fun'. Victorian students were also explicit about the social and cultural role of university: 'the social transition is good – parties every night' (secondary school, Loddon-Campaspe region; 'Uni seems like a link between school and the rest of your life' (senior college, Loddon-Campaspe region).

The questionnaire also explored whether students imagine the work, the people, and the life at university would be interesting or exciting (table 5.7). For each of three items the mean score is close to 4.0 — the prospect of life at university is quite attractive to most students.

Table 5.7 Extent of Agreement with 'Life at University Sounds Exciting'

Overall mean = 3.78 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
	Low access	3.73	3.86	3.98	3.85
Rural	Medium access	3.67	3.90	3.96	3.84
	High access/rural	3.72	3.76	4.03	3.84
Urban	High access/urban	3.58	3.70	3.86	3.72
All		3.64	3.75	3.93	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Socioeconomic background has a significant effect on student responses to all three items. The higher students' SES, the more likely they are to imagine university study is interesting, that it allows you meet interesting people, and that life there would be exciting. Importantly, while student location appears to play no part in whether or not students believe they will be able to explore interesting things at university, all rural subgroups are significantly more likely than their urban peers to believe they would have the chance to 'meet many interesting people' if they went to university, and that life at university 'sounds exciting'. These repeated patterns confirm the focus group findings that the prospect of life at university holds a certain mystique for many rural students, and that the thought of attending university is closely associated with adventure and an exciting social life for at least some.

Excitement about university is strongest in the survey among Year 10 students and some of the most enthusiastic interview responses about university life were from students in Year 10 students in Victoria. Students tended to refer to the social life — 'people say it's the best time of your life - work all day and party all night" (Greater North Eastern Region, Victoria, secondary school). Year 11 and 12 students also mentioned the social life, but saw it more as a part of growing up:

> Someone I know who has been to Melbourne says that everyone fits in at Melbourne. If you go to College you make friends. (Barwon/South Western Victoria, Catholic college)

> I am just looking forward to leaving, and I will be in Melbourne or somewhere. I am just so excited about meeting lots of people. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, p-12 school)

> The whole idea of going to uni is to socialise. (Greater North Eastern Region, Victoria, secondary school)

> Uni seems like a bit of a link between school and the rest of your life. You are an adult but you are a bit of a kid still. We want to go to uni for the social contact. (Loddon - Campaspe Region, Victoria, senior college)

Nonetheless, many students endorsed the view that 'once you are a country kid, you have to get back to where you are a somebody. Because when you are in the city, you are a nobody.' (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, Senior College).

Summary

Tables 5.8 and 5.9 summarise the questionnaire items relating to student attitudes toward school and their general perceptions of higher education and universities, identifying the items on which there are clearly discernible differences in the responses of the student subgroups.

As table 5.8 indicates, student attitudes towards school are influenced far more by their socioeconomic background than by their location. This is not the case, however, for their beliefs about the importance of higher education and life at university (table 5.9). Here the socioeconomic differences are again prominent, but alongside them are distinct and sometimes sizeable variations between urban and rural students.

Higher SES students tend to be more likely than lower SES students to see a university education as important career-wise and attractive in its own right. Lower SES students on the other hand, are more sceptical about the importance in life of university learning and more likely to see the time spent at university as delaying entry to the workforce.

On aggregate, rural and urban students differ less. Urban students are more likely to see a university education as important for skill and career development. Rural students see universities as exciting places where you meet interesting people. They also tend to associate universities with wealth.

Importantly, there are no apparent effects related to distance from a university campus in students' broad conceptions of university life and relevance: wherever there are significant differences in students' attitude, these can be attributed in the main part to the characteristics of the urban or rural context in which they are living.

Table 5.8 Student Subgroups in Greatest Agreement with Statements Regarding Attitudes towards School

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	LOCATION	
		ACCESS	COMMUNITY CONTEXT
	L = lower SES H = higher SES	LA = low access HA = high access	R = rural U = urban
I really want to do well at school	•	•	•
Being at school will really help me get what I want in life	•	•	•
I get a lot of satisfaction from school work	•	•	•
I am interested in the subjects I'm studying	•	•	•
Being at school is just filling in time while I decide my future	L	•	•
I find it difficult t get myself motivated to study	•	•	•
I'm only staying at school because my parents want me to	L	LA	•
I'm only staying at school because there are no job available	L	•	R
I am happy to get by with the bare minimum of work	L	•	•
My parents encourage me to do well at school	H	•	•
I often discuss my school work with members of my family	H	•	•
My friends are not really interested in school	•	•	•
Overall, I enjoy school	•	•	•

EXAMPLE • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
R = rural subgroup in significantly more agreement than urban subgroup

Table 5.9 Student Subgroups in Greatest Agreement with Statements Regarding Attitudes towards Higher Education

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	***LOCATION***	
		ACCESS	***COMMUNITY CONTEXT***
	L = lower SES ***H = higher SES***	***LA = low access*** ***HA = high access***	***R = rural*** ***U = urban***
You can't get a decent job without a university degree	H	•	U*
Completing a university degree is a good investment in the future	H	•	U
University education really helps you develop your skills	•	•	U
University study allows you to explore interesting things	H	•	•
A university education broadens your outlook on life	H	•	•
Going to university offers the chance to meet many interesting people	H	•	R
Life at university sounds exciting	H	•	R
You learn more on the job than you do in a classroom or from books	L	•	•
The years at university are just a way of delaying the hunt for a job	L	•	•
Universities are big and unfriendly places	•	•	•
Universities are really for wealthy people	L	•	R*
'Distance education' (e.g. studying from home) is a good alternative to on-campus study	L	•	•
Distance education is usually a second-best way to study for a university degree	•	•	•

EXAMPLE • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
R = rural subgroup in more agreement than urban subgroup
R = rural subgroup in much more agreement than urban subgroup*

6

The Possibility of Going to University

It's such a big step, and it's a long way to go, all the way down there, and people are scared by the fact that it might not work out, and there's the possibility that they are going to get down there and want to come back.
(Year 12 student, Kimberley Region of WA)

Immediate Plans

The subgroup patterns evident in students' nominations of their preferred activity when leaving school (discussed in chapter 4) are closely reproduced in responses to the question about their actual intentions with regard to the option of higher education upon completion of secondary school. Broadly speaking, however, there is a 10 per cent 'gap' between preference and intention across the subgroups. That is, about 10 per cent fewer respondents indicate that they are definitely planning to go to university than those who give this as their preferred activity. This is remarkably consistent through the SES and location subgroups, with the only deviation being that the higher SES group has a smaller gap of about 7.5 per cent. There are students then who recognise that their personal ambition or preference to go on to a university education is seriously constrained by some factor or factors.

Table 6.1 *Actual Intentions Regarding Higher Education, by Socioeconomic Status (Per cent)*

	Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Definitely planning to enrol in a university course	31.2	38.1	52.6	40.9
Planning to apply for a place but then defer for a year	10.9	12.0	16.9	13.0
Subtotal	**42.1**	**50.1**	**69.5**	**53.9**
Hoping to go to university but may not be able to	16.2	13.6	9.9	13.0
Don't want to go to university now, but may do so later in my life	8.1	9.5	6.4	8.2
Not planning to go to university	21.6	17.0	6.5	15.0
Very undecided	7.7	6.3	5.3	6.4
Haven't really thought about it	4.3	3.5	2.4	3.4
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Both socioeconomic background and location have a clear effect on students' intentions regarding higher education. As table 6.1 shows, a total of 70 per cent of higher SES students definitely plan to enrol in university, with quite a large proportion of these (about one quarter) planning to defer for a year. The figure for medium SES students is 50 per cent and for lower SES students, 42 per cent. Over 20 per cent of lower SES students, more than one in five, are quite definite in their present decision not to go on to university, compared with only 7 per cent of higher SES students.

The differences by student location in intention to go on to higher education are not as great but still important, ranging from 58 per cent of high access/urban students to 46 per cent of low access/rural students. Over 20 per cent of low access students, compared with 12 per cent of high access/urban students, clearly are not planning to go to university.

More lower SES than medium/higher SES students indicate that they are hoping to go to university but may not be able to do so. Student location causes no discernible pattern of response to this item.

Table 6.2 Actual Intentions Regarding Higher Education, by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			***URBAN***	***All***
	Low access	***Medium access***	***High access / rural***	***High access / urban***	
Definitely planning to enrol in a university course	30.9	41.0	38.1	46.5	40.9
Planning to apply for a place but then defer for a year	14.7	11.3	15.5	11.9	13.0
Subtotal	**45.6**	**52.3**	**53.6**	**58.4**	**53.9**
Hoping to go to university but may not be able to	13.4	15.4	11.8	13.6	13.0
Don't want to go to university now, but may do so later in my life	10.1	5.2	9.5	7.0	8.2
Not planning to go to university	21.4	18.4	14.0	12.2	15.0
Very undecided	6.7	5.7	7.5	5.6	6.4
Haven't really thought about it	2.8	2.9	3.6	3.3	3.4
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Factors Influencing the Decision

The remainder of the chapter looks closely at the key influences on students' present intentions as they near the end of their school years. To open up this discussion, tables 6.3 and 6.4 report the single most influential factor in shaping students' present choice. Looking first at those students who definitely intend to enrol in a university, over half the student sample, there are small differences between the student subgroups but these are relatively insignificant in the light of the overwhelmingly vocational or career motive shared by most university aspirants.

Table 6.3 Most Frequently Reported Factor Influencing Present Intentions by Intention and by Socioeconomic Status (Per cent)

	Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*
Students definitely planning to enrol or planning to enrol and defer (53.9 %)			
A university degree would improve my chances of getting a job	33.7	37.9	39.8
A university course would offer me the chance for an interesting and rewarding career	35.3	33.0	31.8
I am interested in the subjects I could study at university	5.8	6.2	8.4
Students hoping to go on but may not be able to (13.0 %)			
A university degree would improve my chances of getting a job	26.3	27.9	27.8
A university course would offer me the chance for an interesting and rewarding career	14.6	15.3	16.5
I don't think my results will be good enough to get into any courses that interest me	17.1	15.3	14.6
The cost of university fees may stop me attending	16.4	10.2	10.8
Students not planning to go university (15.0 %)			
A TAFE course would be more useful to me than a university course	31.3	28.5	35.1
A university qualification is not necessary for the job I want	11.7	11.1	11.7
I want to start earning a proper income as soon as I leave school	10.1	10.4	8.1
A TAFE course would be more affordable for me than university	10.4	8.2	2.7
I don't see any point in me going to university	7.9	9.4	10.8

Table 6.4 Most Frequently Reported Factor Influencing Present Intentions, by Intention and by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			URBAN
	Low access	*Medium access*	*High access / rural*	*High access / urban*
Students definitely planning to enrol or planning to enrol and defer (53.9 %)				
A university degree would improve my chances of getting a job	31.5	37.6	37.8	39.7
A university course would offer me the chance for an interesting and rewarding career	33.4	32.1	31.0	34.0
I am interested in the subjects I could study at university	5.4	5.5	2.5	6.7
Students hoping to go on but may not be able to (13.0 %)				
A university degree would improve my chances of getting a job	23.0	18.2	23.5	32.6
A university course would offer me the chance for an interesting and rewarding career	14.9	12.1	14.8	16.4
I don't think my results will be good enough to get into any courses that interest me	16.8	13.6	13.9	16.6
The cost of university fees may stop me attending	12.4	10.6	16.5	10.3
Students not planning to go university (15.0 %)				
A TAFE course would be more useful to me than a university course	31.3	20.9	30.3	31.8
A university qualification is not necessary for the job I want	11.4	11.9	13.0	10.1
I want to start earning a proper income as soon as I leave school	7.6	11.9	13.0	8.9
A TAFE course would be more affordable for me than university	5.7	14.9	9.7	7.7
I don't see any point in me going to university	8.5	4.5	8.8	10.4

The 13 per cent of students who would like to attend university but believe they may not be able to are a particularly significant group. In their aspiration for higher education, these students are also clearly influenced in good part by

vocational objectives. Keeping their dreams in check, however, are beliefs that either their results will not be good enough for courses of interest or the cost of university fees may be an obstacle. Rural students and lower SES students are more worried about cost — of all the items in table 6.3, the differences between the SES groups are largest on the issue of cost.

Students in the final group, the 15 per cent definitely not planning to attend university, are most likely to report the usefulness of a TAFE course as the main reason for not thinking of university. For these students, a university degree is not a requirement for the jobs they seek. Some of these students are also attracted most to earning an income once they leave school.

Timing of Present Decision

Socioeconomic background has a major effect on the timing of students' decision-making (table 6.5). Higher SES students are more likely than medium/lower SES students to have made their present decision more than three years ago. Since a higher proportion of this group is planning to go to university (with only 7 per cent of them definitely not planning to go), the impression which emerges is of students who have generally taken it for granted for some time that they would proceed to university after school. This group also has smaller proportions of students who are still very undecided or haven't really thought about it.

Table 6.5 Time When First Came to Present Decision, by SES (Per cent)

	Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*
Recently, within the past year	37.9	35.8	27.9
Two or three years ago	27.3	28.1	28.4
More than three years ago	17.7	20.7	33.6
Still very undecided	11.9	12.0	8.3
Haven't really thought about it	5.2	3.4	1.8
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**

Table 6.6 Time When First Came to Present Decision, by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			URBAN
	Low access	*Medium access*	*High access / rural*	*High access / urban*
Recently, within the past year	35.2	31.5	34.5	33.0
Two or three years ago	30.1	30.6	28.5	26.7
More than three years ago	19.8	25.1	20.6	27.9
Still very undecided	10.7	9.0	13.5	9.5
Haven't really thought about it	4.3	3.9	2.8	2.9
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Location also has an effect on the timing of the decision about university, though this effect is not as strong as that of socioeconomic background (table 6.6). Urban students are more likely than rural students to have made their decision more than three years ago, and less likely to be very undecided.

The Attractions of University

In the focus group interviews, job-related motives were the prime reason given for attending university, especially by students attending secondary school in Perth, or in senior colleges in regional towns. These students saw a university education as providing a competitive edge over other options, including TAFE.

In responses to the survey, most students, regardless of socioeconomic background or location, indicated a strong appreciation of the advantages of attending university in relation to future employment and careers. This appreciation has both pragmatic and idealistic aspects: respondents to the survey believe that a degree will improve their chances of getting a job, and will also offer the chance of an interesting and rewarding career. These two considerations are clearly the most important factors in their thinking about their futures.

All student subgroups indicate reasonably strong agreement with the statement 'I am interested in the subjects I could study at university', although this interest in education for its own sake does not rank highly on the list of most important factors in decision-making. Similar numbers of respondents agree that they think they would have a good time at university, but very few consider this an important factor in determining their futures.

However, the value placed on university education is diminished for students who are in lower SES groups, who live at a distance from university campuses, and who live in rural communities, even if these are close to campuses. Taken together, these factors produce a substantial gap in attitudes between the two sub-groups at opposite ends of the spectrum, so to speak -- lower SES/low access students and higher SES/urban students.

On the questionnaire items which deal with the attractions of university education, there are substantial SES effects. Lower SES students are less likely to believe that a university degree will assist them with employment and careers (table 6.7), to be interested in the subjects they could study at university (table 6.8), or to think that they would have a good time there. In all cases except the last (having a good time), there is also a significant location effect, with lower access and rural context being associated with lower appreciation of these possible benefits of university.

Table 6.7 Extent of Agreement with 'A University Degree Would Improve My Chances of Getting a Job'

Overall mean = 4.32 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	4.04	4.24	4.26	<u>4.18</u>
Rural	Medium access	4.14	4.41	4.39	<u>4.32</u>
	High access/rural	4.19	4.27	4.45	<u>4.31</u>
Urban	High access/urban	4.27	4.33	4.50	<u>4.37</u>
All		<u>4.19</u>	<u>4.30</u>	<u>4.45</u>	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of year level is also significant.

Table 6.8 Extent of Agreement with 'I am Interested in the Subjects I Could Study at University'

Overall mean = 3.92 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	3.60	3.79	3.99	3.78
	Medium access	3.59	3.97	4.06	3.88
	High access/rural	3.74	3.87	4.14	3.93
Urban	High access/urban	3.83	3.92	4.16	3.97
All		3.73	3.87	4.12	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

On these three items, the factors of SES and location combine to produce a considerable gap between the means of lower SES/low access students and higher SES/urban students: between 4.04 and 4.50 on the 'improving job prospects' item, 3.84 and 4.26 on the 'interesting and rewarding careers' item, and 3.60 and 4.16 on the 'interest in subjects' item. These represent major differences in perception and judgment.

The belief that going to university would offer the chance to become more independent is influenced by both SES and location. Higher SES students and rural students are more likely to see the opportunity for independence in attending university. For rural young people for whom accommodation costs present no barrier, the prospect of the independence of living in a college is eagerly anticipated:

> If you can get into Melbourne, if you can put up with the costs, you get a lot more freedom away from your parents. (North-West Victoria)

> I just want to be away from my parents. (Northern Victoria)

> It's just the thing about being away from your parents and being independent. (North-West Victoria)

Socioeconomic background is apparently the only influence on the extent to which students perceive they have the encouragement of their teachers and believe their friends are likely to attend university. Lower SES students are less likely to believe that most of their friends are planning to attend university, or to believe they are encouraged by teachers to aim for university (table 6.9). On the last item, the difference is large: between means of 3.19 for lower SES students and 3.63 for higher SES students — only 44 per cent of lower SES students believed their teachers were encouraging them to think of higher education, compared with 58 per cent of higher SES students. Importantly, no such difference in the attitude of teachers is evident in the data relating to location.

Table 6.9 *Extent of Agreement with 'My Teachers have Encouraged Me to Aim for University'*

Overall mean = 3.39 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.15	3.41	3.61	**3.38**
Rural	Medium access	3.26	3.44	3.71	**3.45**
	High access/rural	3.13	3.25	3.63	**3.34**
Urban	High access/urban	3.27	3.32	3.63	**3.42**
All		**3.19**	**3.32**	**3.63**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

However, there is a significant difference in students' perceptions of the attitude of parents according to location, as well as SES. As table 6.10 indicates, there is a very large difference between lower and higher SES sub-groups on the item, 'My parents want me to do a university course' (a difference in means between 3.19 and 3.92), compounded by a difference between rural and urban groups. Taking for comparison the 'extreme' groups, the low access/lower SES subgroup and the high access/urban/higher SES subgroup, the proportions of students who believe their parents want them to go on to higher education are 38 per cent and 69 per cent respectively — a compelling indication of social differences in educational aspiration.

The high access rural group is much closer to the medium and low access groups than to the urban group on this item. This suggests that the community context

(the 'rural culture' factor) is more influential than physical distance to a university campus. The combined effect of these factors produces another huge gap between the lower SES/low access group (mean of 3.00) and the higher SES/urban group (mean of 3.99). Given the importance of parents' views and advice in students' thinking about their futures, this finding is of major significance.

Table 6.10 Extent of Agreement with 'My Parents Want me to Do a University Course'

Overall mean = 3.49 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
	Low access	3.00	3.28	3.76	**3.29**
Rural	Medium access	2.98	3.31	3.97	**3.38**
	High access/rural	3.06	3.21	3.88	**3.39**
Urban	High access/urban	3.41	3.52	3.99	**3.65**
All		**3.19**	**3.36**	**3.92**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of gender is also significant.

The one item in this section on which there is an effect of location but not SES is 'I'm considering university because there aren't any jobs around here' (Table 6.11). While the levels of agreement are generally low, suggesting that the sentiment is not a very strong one, the effect that can be detected is clearly one of rurality, rather than distance from a university campus. Rural students in all access categories register higher levels of agreement with this statement, presumably reflecting a perception of the relatively depressed state of some rural economies.

Undoubtedly there are rural areas in which few job prospects exist at the present time. Young people in the Western District of Victoria, for example, were

pessimistic about getting jobs in their town. They expected to be compelled to leave town to seek employment, and university was regarded as a possible pathway out of the rural area and into work. As one student remarked:

> This town will be dead in ten years, people moving away, banks closing down, hospital struggling. All the services here are closing. All the people our age know that there is no opportunity here. (Western District, Victoria).

Table 6.11 Extent of Agreement with 'I'm Considering University Because There Aren't Any Jobs Around Here'

Overall mean = 2.00 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	2.13	2.01	1.95	**2.03**
	Medium access	2.08	2.22	2.21	**2.18**
	High access/rural	2.11	2.09	2.02	**2.07**
Urban	High access/urban	1.95	1.87	1.91	**1.90**
All		**2.03**	**1.99**	**1.96**	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

However, a lack of employment options is not a universal feature of rural Australia. As the focus groups reveal, some students are confident that they will get jobs in their local area, especially the boys. Young men in the Pilbara mining area, for example, were optimistic about their chances of getting good jobs with good pay when they left school. Similarly, young men in the Barwon area of Victoria, dominated by dairying, were confident about getting apprenticeships to work in local industries. But in other areas where employment is unavailable, it has a profound effect on students' thinking.

The TAFE Option

In terms of general usefulness and affordability, a TAFE course is seen as a more attractive option than university by higher proportions of lower SES and rural students (tables 6.12 and 6.13), though the differences between rural and urban students on the question of usefulness are slight. While 30 per cent of lower SES students see TAFE as more useful to them than a university course, only 13 per cent of higher SES believe so.

Table 6.12 Extent of Agreement with 'A TAFE Course Would be More Useful to Me than a University Course'

Overall mean = 2.68 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
Rural	Low access	3.13	2.84	2.46	2.83
	Medium access	2.96	2.75	2.29	2.70
	High access/rural	2.89	2.79	2.35	2.67
Urban	High access/urban	2.83	2.70	2.34	2.61
All		2.93	2.77	2.35	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

There is a clear difference between the high access rural and urban groups in terms of their perceptions of the relative affordability of TAFE and higher education. The high access rural students are close to the low and medium access rural respondents on this question, which — along with more pronounced differences in responses to other items about cost and leaving home associated with attending university, discussed in the chapter to follow — suggests that many rural students defined as high access see themselves as being in a similar position in regard to costs to students defined as low or medium access.

In the focus groups, rural students discussed the advantages of TAFE study over university, as well as some ambivalence towards TAFE as an option after leaving school. Some young people believed that TAFE was a 'second best' option to university, because of its perceived lower status. For example:

> A university degree looks better in a job interview — it looks better on your resume. (North-West of Victoria)
>
> TAFE is inferior to a university degree. (South West of WA)
>
> In my town it's kind of low brow to go to TAFE. (Perth boarding school)
>
> Some people think of uni as too high, but think of working in Woollies as too low, so they think of TAFE. (Eastern Pilbara)
>
> It's a bit of a weak option. If you're not academic it can be a good option, it can help you get into uni. (Northern Victoria)

On the other hand, other students believed that TAFE might be a good option and said that its status was changing:

> I see no difference. If I can do a night-time TAFE course while I am working ... everyone gets a university degree now. For me, I don't want to get into big debts at uni before I start anything. (Northern Victoria).

Table 6.13 Extent of Agreement with 'A TAFE Course Would be More Affordable for Me than University'

Overall mean = 3.53 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Rural	Low access	3.79	3.67	3.35	**3.61**
	Medium access	4.02	3.87	3.14	**3.73**
	High access/rural	3.76	3.68	3.38	**3.60**
Urban	High access/urban	3.58	3.54	3.17	**3.43**
All		**3.71**	**3.63**	**3.25**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

Of the students who were intending to go to TAFE, many were choosing this option because they regarded it as a pathway into a good job. Closely coupled with this perspective was the understanding that TAFE was less costly. The following quotes from focus group interviews with students at a private school in Perth reveal a range of views on the relevance of TAFE and on the attainability of university.

> Most people doing TEE are thinking of doing TAFE, they are only thinking of doing uni if they are aiming for things like medicine or law.
>
> You don't need uni any more for a lot of things, now that TAFE is an option.
>
> University is more theoretical. TAFE is more hands on.

A student at a secondary school in the Kimberley Region of WA summed up the views of many: 'Maybe people don't go to uni because they prefer to be out and experiencing life rather than learning it through books.'

Students who were thinking of enrolling in a TAFE course frequently mentioned the lower cost factor as an attraction. For others, gaining a TAFE credential was seen as a way of enhancing their chances of getting a part-time job to support them in university later in life.

Information Sources and Knowledge of Options

For most students, the key sources of information about the opportunities for attending university are school careers advisers, teachers, and their mothers. In the virtual absence of any location effects, table 6.14 shows the relative importance of school staff and parents by socioeconomic background.

Lower socioeconomic background students show more reliance on careers advisers and teachers than they do on their parents. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, on the other hand, rely equally on their parents and school staff. The only location effect, small but statistically significant, is the greater likelihood of rural students to use careers teachers as information sources, suggesting that fewer alternative information sources may be available to students in rural areas.

Low and medium access students might be expected to have greater awareness of the distance education or open learning options available to them. All student subgroups reported relatively low levels of knowledge of these opportunities (all means slightly above 2.0), but students with lower access did report more awareness. However, the differences between these students and those with high access are small, considering the more obvious relevance of off-campus study in the decision-making of students who live long distances from a university. This puzzling absence of an observable 'distance effect' was found in two related items. In responding to the statement 'Distance education is a good alternative to

on-campus study', urban students were just as likely to agree as rural students. There was also no obvious distance effect in responses to the proposition that 'distance education is usually a second-best way to study for a university degree', though in this case the lower socioeconomic subgroup returned a higher mean.

In the focus group interviews, distance learning was consistently and strongly given a negative assessment. The whole point of higher education was strongly linked to the social experience, and distance education was seen as counter to that purpose. Students in the Victorian schools had often had experience of forms of distance education, through teleconferencing and various forms of on-line education. These learning modes did not receive a positive response:

Table 6.14 Most Important Information Sources About University, by Socioeconomic Background

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
LOCATION	***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***
Mother	3.31	3.48	3.75
Father	3.12	3.31	3.67
School careers advisers	3.73	3.81	3.70
Teachers	3.53	3.60	3.47

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item.

> It is not an option. This school is 'high-tech'. It's not a workable option. They haven't worked out how to get students to work by themselves — too limited feedback. Limited communication and too impersonal. Teleconferencing is a good way to get away from it, restructuring courses. They have to have facilities in the home, so costs come into it. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, senior college)

> You would have to be good to do it over the computer, because if you weren't good, you would have to ask teachers how to do it. I wouldn't be good because I don't have anyone around me who would know. (Barwon/South Western Region, Victoria, Catholic regional school)

> The views of students in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia were focussed on what they saw as the difficulty of lack of support, commenting that 'There isn't someone to help you' and 'You don't have peers or friends to help you.'

7

Inhibiting Factors

Uni! Unless your parents are rich you don't have the opportunity to go there.
(Year 10 student, Northern Victoria)

Perceptions of the Costs of Pursuing Higher Education

Large and consistent differences emerge in student attitudes towards the anticipated impact of the financial cost of higher education. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and rural students are both much more likely to view cost as a deterrent or an obstacle. Once again, therefore, the most marked and important contrasts emerge between lower SES, rural students with limited access to a campus, and higher SES, urban students.

Not unexpectedly, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely than others to believe the cost of fees will stop them from attending university (table 7.1). Of the low access/lower SES students, 43 per cent reported that they perceive the cost of fees to be a barrier, compared with 21 per cent of urban, higher SES students.

Table 7.1 Extent of Agreement with 'The Cost of University Fees May Stop Me Attending'

Overall mean = 2.80 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	3.16	3.02	2.60	2.96
Rural	Medium access	3.37	3.03	2.48	2.99
	High access/rural	3.03	3.04	2.57	2.89
Urban	High access/urban	2.94	2.72	2.37	2.66
All		3.05	2.88	2.46	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

The difference between rural and urban students in their perceptions of the impact of costs is unmistakable: on the inhibiting effect of university fees, on the capacity of their families to support them while studying, and on the affordability of suitable accommodation. These perceptions explain in part why rural students tend to view TAFE as a more affordable option, a belief magnified by large and somewhat predictable socioeconomic differences in perceptions of the relative affordability of TAFE and university study.

The attitudes of rural students to higher education costs are tightly interwoven with the conviction that attending university means leaving home. As table 7.2 shows, this belief is strongly held even by students who have a campus relatively close to their home— that is, students who are classified as high access by their self-reported proximity to a university. In fact, the mean scores on the item 'I would probably have to leave home if I were to attended university' for high access/rural and high access/urban are startlingly different at 3.86 and 2.21 respectively.

Table 7.2 Extent of Agreement with 'I Would Probably Have to Leave Home if I Were to Attend University'

Overall mean = 3.21 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	4.33	4.40	4.46	4.38
Rural	Medium access	4.50	4.48	4.41	4.47
	High access/rural	3.81	3.83	3.95	3.86
Urban	High access/urban	2.25	2.21	2.17	2.21
All		**3.22**	**3.23**	**3.13**	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item.

The significance of this finding must be stressed. Either high access/rural students have little intention of attending their nearby university campus, or large numbers of them anticipate leaving home to do so, perhaps to reduce the financial demands on their families by becoming financially independent. Since the association of 'attending university' and 'leaving home' is consistent for high access/rural students regardless of their socioeconomic background, the former conclusion is the most plausible.

At least two explanations are possible for the relative unattractiveness of the nearest campus. First, and more obviously, the campus may not offer courses in particular fields of study or may not have the perceived status of other institutions. The focus group interviews confirm that regional universities are seen by many students as 'not as good' as those located in major metropolitan areas: 'the unis here are a dead end'. It was a common perception that regional universities do not offer a range of courses comparable to metropolitan universities.

The second explanation for the apparent unattractiveness of the local campus is that, as demonstrated earlier, attending university is closely coupled in the thinking of many rural students with dreams of independence, of a new and exciting lifestyle. Going on to university may be perceived as the vehicle for leaving the rural community and seeking new opportunities in the city or another rural area.

The focus group interviews reveal a split in student attitudes on this issue. While there was a strong message that, for many students, moving away from home and having greater independence would be welcome, there was also a persistent message that some did not anticipate that they would cope with the separation from their families.

> I hate the city, it's too big, too many people. At the moment I don't care about a social life, but when I go away next year ... if there was a uni here, I would stay here forever. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Vic, p-12 school)

> It's easier to go down to Albury-Wodonga. If I went to Melbourne, I would be lost. (Greater North Eastern Region, Victoria, secondary school)

> It's a big step — three hours away from home and friends. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, p-12 school)

The prospect of finding affordable accommodation and the demands on family income weigh heavily on the minds of rural students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The mean for rural students, overall, on the item 'It would be difficult for me to find affordable accommodation if I went to university' is 3.17, compared with 2.48 for urban students. Similarly, rural students, especially those of lower SES, are far more likely to believe their families cannot afford the costs of supporting university study.

Concern about accommodation and relocation is a major factor mentioned by young people in almost every rural school visited by the project team. The actual costs of education, such as HECS, books and materials were seen as secondary to the enormous costs of living away from home. As one student commented:

> I know a girl who wanted to go to uni, but she didn't feel she could because her parents couldn't afford it. The main problem with money is that you have to live there. (Northern Victoria)

For a proportion of students, the cost of accommodation is a reason for choosing a regional university:

> I've got about ten friends who are there (regional university) — a small group in Melbourne and the rest went to Bendigo — it was because of the costs, just get a degree and then move out. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, senior college)

> It might be cheaper to go to a regional university — it's only an hour to Bendigo. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, p-12 school)

> Finding accommodation is a major factor about where you go. (SW of WA, college)

Students in the Pilbara were concerned that if 'you went to university, you would have to spend the rest of your life paying it off.' Students in Victoria were also very concerned about the implications of the costs of going to university:

> I would go to Melbourne if we had the money. It would be a killer. I could afford to go there, but it would be in poverty. It would cost at least $12,000 a year. (Greater North Eastern Region)

In some cases, parents were able to move into a metropolitan area to support their children through higher education, or young people were able to live with a family member or friend. In a number of schools, young people mentioned the alarming possibility of students being unable to afford food after paying for their university and accommodation costs.

> They don't eat food, because they can't afford it, my sister does it all the time. (Northern Victoria)

> On the radio they are saying that students in Ballarat are just starving themselves for an education. (North-West Victoria)

Despite these serious concerns about costs, the overall questionnaire responses of students reveal considerable uncertainty in their understanding of the cost of university fees, the overall cost of going to university, and the sources of

financial assistance available. However, for Year 12 students, closer to the point of decision, the financial reality of going to university was beginning to be calculated by many students and their families:

> I was budgeting with my parents the other night. Eight to ten thousand dollars for college, and they can't afford that. We were trying to figure out how we can do it. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, senior college)

> I went to some universities last year, and when I talked to some students, I became aware for the first time of how much it cost. (Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria, senior college)

Generally, higher SES students express more confidence in their knowledge of the costs, though there are some differences between the location subgroups, with low and medium access students expressing slightly more confidence. Overall, however, the student subgroups for whom cost may be a critical decision factor appear barely better informed, if at all, than their counterparts.

One of the contextual issues to be taken into account in understanding the choices made by young people in rural and isolated areas of Australia is the strong cultural priority placed on self reliance. In many rural communities, a high value is placed on the ability of individuals, families and communities to 'make do' in difficult times, and to draw on personal and local resources to overcome hardship.

In a number of the rural communities which we visited, students were witnessing rapid structural changes to the rural economy, through both global changes to markets (eg. the wool industry, meat export) and through environmental crises (eg. wheat). It was clear from the focus group interviews that students were aware of the ways in which the effects of these circumstances were eroding the family's financial independence. In a number of cases brought to our attention, a parent would be working as a labourer interstate simply to provide income for the family farm, hoping to tide things over until better times came. For many of these students, 'credit' is not a desirable option. Hence, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), with its deferred payment, is not necessarily perceived favourably by students in rural areas. Victorian students from the Loddon-Campaspe region suggested that 'HECS seems to work but it might disadvantage people'. The view was that 'I don't want to get into big debts at Uni before I start anything; when you go to uni, things cost a lot of money. They wait until you get a certain amount of money, but you still have that debt over your head'.

Further, HECS arrangements are not well understood by many rural students. Students interviewed at a senior school in the Eastern Pilbara region of Western Australia had not heard of the HECS, and not only revealed a lack of

information but also possibly a resistance to considering the HECS as an option. Other Western Australian students believed that distance education (generally an unpopular option with rural young people) would not attract a HECS liability.

Personal Pressures and the Relevance and Attainability of University

... it's not that they don't love me or anything.
(Year 12 student in the Loddon-Campaspe Region, Victoria).

For rural students, then, enrolling in higher education may create particular personal pressures to do with finding sufficient money and the upheaval of leaving home. In interviews, students tended to 'talk up' their chances of going to university, and the tone of the discussions implied that 'good' parents were making it possible for their children to attend university, whatever the sacrifice. The young woman who made the comment above about her own parents, countered: 'It's my responsibility, my life. I don't expect them to do that for me, they can't do it.'

The rural students in this study are more likely than urban students to claim they would support themselves financially if they went to university (overall mean of 3.01 for all rural subgroups, compared with 2.80 for urban students), and that they would face losing touch with their friends. A commitment to higher education will cause substantial change and dislocation in the lives of many rural students.

Table 7.3 Extent of Agreement with 'Getting Organised for University is So Complicated I Don't Know Where to Start'

Overall mean = 3.03 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Rural	Low access	3.23	3.12	3.08	3.14
	Medium access	3.27	3.14	2.97	3.14
	High access/rural	3.19	3.19	2.98	3.12
Urban	High access/urban	3.07	2.88	2.83	2.91
All		3.15	3.03	2.92	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

In these circumstances, planning for university can be a complex task. As table 7.3 shows, there are statistically significant differences between the student subgroups on the question of the complexity of getting organised for university. Here there is a consistent location effect and an SES effect as well. Lower SES, low and medium access students are least likely to believe they have the 'know how'. By contrast, higher SES, urban students appear to be less puzzled and less daunted by the challenge of planning a university future, possibly because information is more readily accessible for them, the people around them provide informed support, and the planning task may simply involve fewer major personal decisions.

The focus group interviews with students in rural schools often turned to a discussion of the ways in which students could organise themselves to afford university. In a number of cases, students were taking TAFE courses (for example, in hospitality) specifically so that they would be able to pick up part-time work in bars and cafes while they were university students. Others were planning to take a year off study to earn some extra money, deferring their university place. Many had made detailed plans by Year 11, for how they could meet the costs:

> I have to defer for a year and work part-time to even get a start. Five of my friends are in Year 12 and they all have to defer to get money.

> A lot of people are choosing to do VCE over three years, so they can get a part time job and have some money to back them up.

> My parents will pay — a residency, meals. HECS is on my own.

Getting In

Some students foresee academic obstacles to participation in higher education, either believing the subjects they are studying will not lead to courses they want to do, or that university will not be attainable with the school results they predict they will receive. Students in interviews frequently stated that their anticipated tertiary entrance scores were a significant barrier in considering attending a university, and the reason why they would consider TAFE as an alternative.

The survey data reveal significant socioeconomic differences in perceptions of whether present subjects lead to courses of personal interest, compounded by smaller but nevertheless statistically significant differences between low, medium and high access students. Students in the low access, lower SES subgroup are more likely to agree with the statement 'I probably won't have the subjects for courses that interest me' (mean of 2.76 compared with 2.45 for all students).

With regard to students' self-assessment of whether or not their school results will be good enough to gain access to courses of interest to them, table 7.4 shows that there are striking contrasts in the opinions of the student subgroups. The differences are mainly due to socioeconomic factors, but again these are compounded by location effects. Taking for comparison once again the 'extreme' subgroups, the low access/lower SES subgroup and the high access/urban/higher SES subgroup, the proportions of students who believe their results will not be good enough for the courses that interest them are 46 per cent (approaching half) and 26 per cent respectively. Notably, lower SES students who have low or medium access to university campuses are more likely than not to believe that their results will not be adequate for entry to courses that interest them.

Table 7.4 Extent of agreement with 'I Don't Think My Results Will be Good Enough to Get into Any Courses that Interest Me'

Overall mean = 2.90 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		Lower SES	Medium SES	Higher SES	All
Rural	Low access	3.30	3.06	2.65	3.03
	Medium access	3.25	3.01	2.63	2.99
	High access/rural	2.96	2.94	2.60	2.83
Urban	High access/urban	3.10	2.92	2.67	2.88
All		3.12	2.96	2.65	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

A sizeable proportion of students who responded to the survey, about one in six, had already decided that university is not for them. To probe student perceptions of the personal relevance of higher education, the questionnaire invited responses to three items:

- 'I don't see any point in me going to university';
- 'I want to start earning a proper income as soon as I leave school'; and
- 'A university qualification is not necessary for the job I want'.

The patterns of response to these items are consistent, revealing strong socioeconomic effects coupled with similarly strong location effects. Table 7.5, reporting means for the item 'A university qualification is not necessary for the

job I want', reflects patterns found for all three items. Again, the 'extreme' subgroups show a marked contrast in attutudes: 31 per cent of low access/lower SES students agree with this item, compared with only 15 per cent of high access/urban/high SES students.

In rural areas where jobs were apparently readily available, the relevance of university is less obvious:

> A lot of people know they can earn good money here, why spend four years at uni? (Eastern Pilbara region of WA, senior high school)

> The money is very attractive, truck drivers earn twice that of a teacher, so why go to uni? (Eastern Pilbara region of WA, senior high school)

Table 7.5 *Extent of Agreement with 'A University Qualification is Not Necessary for the Job I Want'*

Overall mean = 2.39 on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	2.88	2.63	2.23	**2.58**
Rural	Medium access	2.58	2.41	2.25	**2.42**
	High access/rural	2.67	2.51	2.16	**2.43**
Urban	High access/urban	2.39	2.40	2.08	**2.29**
All		**2.57**	**2.47**	**2.14**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

The decision not to pursue higher education may be made after much weighing-up of the options. A central issue for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is the concern that the 'investment' of higher education will not 'pay off'. Many students interviewed were especially concerned about the effects a drain of family finances would have on their parents and siblings. For example, students from small towns in rural Western Australia explained:

> You might not get a job with uni and it costs more (Northern WA)

> It might be a big waste of time, especially because some uni graduates don't get jobs (Pilbara Region of WA)

> I don't want to be taking money away from my parents and stuff, it's their superannuation. (South-West of WA)

Comments of this kind suggest students who agree with the questionnaire item 'I don't see any point in me going to university' do not necessarily have low levels of self-esteem or lack confidence in their personal academic ability — they may simply have reached a significant personal decision about their best career options and the way in which they prefer to live their lives, a future in which university does not figure highly.

Summary

Overall, there are pronounced differences between urban and rural students in their assessment of the relevance and attainability of higher education, though the differences between socioeconomic subgroups are more widespread and stronger. Rural students are more worried by the costs of attending university — which are strongly associated with the costs of leaving home, regardless of whether or not a university is nearby — and are more likely to be looking towards employment for which a university qualification is not required.

As discussed more fully in chapter 9, the educational disadvantage of rural students and lower SES students is not only due to discouraging effects, such as prohibitive costs and perceptions of lack of personal relevance, but also is caused by the absence of an encouraging climate. These students are less likely to believe that a university degree will lead to an interesting career and less likely to experience the positive effects of parental encouragement. Perhaps the most significant challenge in lifting the university participation of rural students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is to find ways to strengthen these encouraging factors.

8

Patterns of Preference for Intending Higher Education Students

Overall, three-quarters of the students in the sample were planning or hoping to attend university, including those who indicated they intended to go to university later in their life. Of the students who at some stage wish to go on, 61 per cent have a firm idea of the university they would like to attend. The discussion that follows indicates some important variations across the major dimensions of location and socioeconomic background.

Clarity of Choice and Preferred Mode of Study

There are only small variations between the student groups in the firmness of their choice of a preferred university, but a slightly higher proportion of higher SES students (63 per cent) than lower SES students (59 per cent) have a firm idea of the university they prefer. Despite these means overall, a relatively high proportion, 66 per cent, of lower SES/low access students are clear about which university they would like to attend. This finding is not entirely surprising given that group is self-selected by their indication of aspirations to attend university. It would seem that once lower SES/low access students have crossed the threshold of aspiring to university, they are as focussed in their aspirations as the equally most focussed group of students, higher SES/high access urban students.

Table 8.1 Intended Mode of Study, by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			*URBAN*
	Low access	***Medium access***	***High access / rural***	***High access / urban***
On-campus	86	87	84	82
Off-campus	14	13	16	18

The figures in table 8.1 indicate an overwhelming preference of all students for an on-campus experience. It is interesting to note, contrary to expectations, the slightly higher level of interest in the off-campus mode from the high access/ urban students. The apparent indifference of low access and medium access students towards off-campus study reflects the findings of earlier chapters — rural school students who are attracted to university are attracted to the idea of attending university. No effects of socioeconomic background could be detected for this item.

Factors Influencing the Choice of a Preferred University

Students were asked to rate each of six factors influencing their choice of university on a five point scale from 'a great deal to 'not at all'. Considering the responses overall, students are most influenced by course or subject offerings; that is, whether the university has the course or subject they want to pursue (table 8.2). The second factor rated by a majority of students as having a great deal of influence is the university's reputation. The convenience of transport from home to university and closeness of the university to home are considerations for a minority of students, confirming the established pattern of Australian students staying in their home territory. The presence of friends is not a major consideration for most students, and only a minority considered the availability of distance education in selecting their preferred university.

Table 8.2 Influence on Choice of 'The Particular Courses or Subjects Being Offered at the University'

Overall mean = 4.49 on scale 1 (no influence) to 5 (great deal of influence)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
Rural	Low access	4.49	4.47	4.53	**4.49**
	Medium access	4.47	4.52	4.55	**4.52**
	High access/rural	4.40	4.57	4.60	**4.55**
Urban	High access/urban	4.44	4.56	4.50	**4.47**
All		**4.43**	**4.50**	**4.53**	

Gender and year level make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item.

Overwhelmingly, students are concerned foremost with a field of study when they select a university. The high mean scores on the issue of course and subject availability for all students are striking and the variations between the subgroups are fairly minimal, none being statistically significant.

The reputation of universities is also clearly in students' minds when they think about which university they prefer. The mean scores in table 8.3 show a strong pattern of SES influence across all location subgroups with significant differences between all the SES groups. The differences within the location subgroups appear negligible. A reasonable hypothesis here is that a key attribute

of the cultural capital of higher SES students, regardless of whether they are in urban or rural locations, is an awareness of the status of institutions. They also may be more likely to have some first-hand knowledge of universities — and, the touchstone of status, what kinds of students go to them.

Table 8.3 Influence on Choice of 'The University's Reputation'

Overall mean = 3.69 on scale 1 (no influence) to 5 (great deal of influence

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	
LOCATION		Medium SES	All
Rural	Low access	3.63	**3.63**
	Medium access	3.73	**3.68**
	High access/rural	3.69	**3.68**
Urban	High access/urban	3.66	**3.71**
All		**3.67**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contributions of gender and year level are also significant.

Table 8.4 Influence on Choice of 'The Convenience of Transport from Home to University'

Overall mean = 3.12 on scale 1 (no influence) to 5 (great deal of influence)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	
LOCATION		Medium SES	All
Rural	Low access	2.73	**2.70**
	Medium access	2.89	**2.75**
	High access/rural	3.09	**3.12**
Urban	High access/urban	3.36	**3.31**
All		**3.15**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable and the location variable make significant contributions to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of year level is also significant.

The convenience of transport from home to university (table 8.4) is considered by a slight majority of students to influence their choice of preferred university. There is a noteworthy pattern in the responses of the subgroups by socioeconomic background. Higher proportions of the lower SES groups rate transport as an influence on their choice.

The generally lower influence attached to transport availability by rural students is a sign of the resolution of many to leave home if they go to university, in which case the question of transport from home to university has little relevance.

Related, of course, is the impact on choice of the proximity of the university to home. The results in Table 8.5 suggest that, with a mean of 2.96 overall, this is a slightly less influential factor in student decision-making. Not surprisingly, there are minimal differences between the low and medium access rural students for whom proximity is no doubt fairly meaningless. There are, however, statistically significant differences between the high access/rural students and the high/access urban students, reinforcing the earlier conclusion that not all students living near regional campuses are necessarily influenced by the proximity of these campuses when they consider selecting a university.

Table 8.5 *Influence on Choice of 'The Closeness of the University to Your Permanent Home'*

Overall mean = 2.96 on scale 1 (no influence) to 5 (great deal of influence

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		***Lower SES***	***Medium SES***	***Higher SES***	***All***
	Low access	2.56	2.62	2.39	2.53
Rural	Medium access	2.46	2.62	2.52	2.54
	High access/rural	3.16	2.90	2.76	2.90
Urban	High access/urban	3.21	3.25	3.14	3.20
All		**3.03**	**3.01**	**2.89**	

Underlining indicates the location variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item.

There is 'commonsense' appeal in the idea that students' choices are strongly influenced by their friends, but the results in this survey suggest otherwise, a pattern found in similar studies (McInnis and James 1995). Over 80 per cent of the students who plan to go on to university do not consider the presence of

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friends as a factor in making their choice about which university to attend. There are no statistically significant differences between the student groupings on any dimension. However, there is some indication that a relatively higher proportion of low access rural students might attach importance to friends in their decision-making.

Table 8.6 *Influence on Choice of 'Availability of Distance Education or Flexible Delivery Options'*

Overall mean = 2.18 on scale 1 (no influence) to 5 (great deal of influence)

		SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS			
LOCATION		*Lower SES*	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
	Low access	2.17	2.20	2.07	**2.16**
Rural	Medium access	2.04	1.96	1.93	**1.97**
	High access/rural	2.36	2.18	1.96	**2.13**
Urban	High access/urban	2.30	2.37	2.03	**2.23**
All		**2.29**	**2.27**	**2.02**	

Underlining indicates the SES variable makes a significant contribution to explaining variation in this item. The contribution of year level is also significant.

Finally, the 'availability of distance education or flexible delivery options' (table 8.6) is the least influential factor in making choices about which university to attend, regardless of student location. Only 15 per cent of students, around one in six, consider this to have an impact on their thinking. However, a word of caution is necessary, since the extent to which students understand the terminology of 'distance education' and 'flexible delivery' used in the questionnaire may have an impact on their responses. Nevertheless, the patterns of variation in the responses by socioeconomic subgroup are statistically significant. Lower and medium SES students are markedly more likely to take the availability of distance and flexible delivery options into consideration than higher SES students.

Field of Study Preferences

The survey asked students who indicated they wanted to go on to university to select the general field of study in which they were interested from a list of the DETYA classifications of fields of study.

More than half the students are aiming for three main areas of choice. Well over a third of the sample of those intending to go to university are aiming for arts or business courses, and about 15 per cent have health sciences in mind — intentions that reflect the national pattern of enrolments by field of study.

Table 8.7 reveals no distinct patterns of differences in the general fields in which the students hope to study. It is hardly surprising that only 1.4 per cent of urban students are interested in Agriculture/Forestry/Animal Husbandry. Urban students show slightly more preference than rural students for the professional fields such as Architecture/Building/Planning, Business/Administration/ Economics, Engineering/Surveying, and Law /Legal Studies.

Table 8.7 Intended Field of Study, by Location (Per cent)

	RURAL			***URBAN***
	Low access	***Medium access***	***High access / rural***	***High access / urban***
Agric./Forestry/Animal Husbandry	8.3	7.0	5.1	1.4
Architecture/Building/Planning	3.5	2.2	2.7	4.2
Arts/Humanities/Social Science	19.0	20.6	25.2	19.6
Business/Administration/Economics	15.3	12.7	15.1	17.9
Education	10.6	14.9	11.2	9.8
Engineering/Surveying (including computer technology)	11.6	9.8	10.7	14.9
Health Sciences	15.6	19.0	15.0	14.9
Law/Legal Studies	3.5	3.5	4.9	6.7
Veterinary Science	2.8	2.2	2.2	3.0
Science	9.6	8.2	8.0	7.5
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Likewise, the impact of socioeconomic background on intended field of study is not particularly clear. The differences across the SES groups for most fields of study are slight, though there are some interesting trends shown in table 8.8 that might bear closer investigation. For example: twice the proportion of higher SES students are interested in a Science course as those from the lower SES group; slightly higher proportions are aiming for Arts courses; fewer are interested in Business or even Law/Legal Studies. Teaching, as ever, is more attractive to the lower SES groups. We might speculate that the higher SES students are less pressed to focus on a vocational course and see a general degree as a useful first option.

Table 8.8 Intended Field of Study, by Socioeconomic Status (Per cent)

	Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*
Agriculture/Forestry/Animal Husbandry	4.0	4.1	3.7
Architecture/Building/Planning	3.6	3.4	3.4
Arts/Humanities/Social Science	21.1	18.9	23.2
Business/Administration/Economics	17.7	18.1	13.7
Education	14.3	11.0	8.1
Engineering/Surveying (including computer technology)	11.6	13.2	13.7
Health Sciences	14.0	15.1	16.5
Law/Legal Studies	5.9	6.1	4.6
Veterinary Science	2.9	2.4	2.9
Science	5.0	7.7	10.0
	100.0	**100.0**	**100.0**

9

A Summary of the Influences of Socioeconomic Background, Distance and Community Context on Attitudes Towards Higher Education

Uni is right out of your comfort zone.
(Year 11 student, Pilbara Region of WA)

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that educational advantage and disadvantage are the result of a three-way intersection of family socioeconomic background, the characteristics of the community context in which people live, and the physical distance from a campus. The data indicate that it is a serious over-simplification to assume that imbalances in the higher education of rural and isolated people are principally due to distance from a university and the costs associated with relocation, though these are indeed major influences.

Socioeconomic effects are generally far more pronounced and pervasive than the location effects detectable in this dataset. However, the research also shows that the effects of socioeconomic background sometimes combine with those of location — which includes distance from a campus and the nature of the community context — to produce substantial contrasts in the attitudes and perceptions of school students.

Putting specific educational aspirations to one side for the moment, the study reveals remarkable similarities in the personal goals and priorities of the young people surveyed. Where there are differences, these are usually small. School students across Australia are alike in their outlooks, in their immediate personal objectives, and what they are looking for in life.

Differences begin to emerge, however, in student attitudes towards school, particularly in the importance attached to completing school and the reasons for staying on at school. Even more substantial and statistically significant differences appear in attitudes towards higher education and its perceived personal relevance.

The most telling contrasts appear in student reactions to the personal possibility of going to university. Here the subgroups analysed in this study diverge considerably. There are large socioeconomic effects, large urban-rural contrasts, and a number of distance effects, though the last are generally considerably smaller. Most striking are the profound effects that are a combination of both family socioeconomic background and location.

Tables 9.1 and 9.2 on the following pages show a strikingly consistent pattern of difference between student subgroups in their responses to two sets of items: the factors that can reasonably be classified as 'encouraging' higher education participation, and those that might 'discourage' students from considering or taking steps towards enrolling in a university.

Table 9.1 *Student Subgroups in Greatest Agreement with Factors that Potentially Encourage Higher Education Participation*

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	***LOCATION***	
		ACCESS	***COMMUNITY CONTEXT***
	L = lower SES ***H = higher SES***	***LA = low access*** ***HA = high access***	***R = rural*** ***U = urban***
A university degree would improve my chances of getting a job	H	HA	•
A university course would offer me the chance for an interesting and rewarding career	H	•	U
I am interested in the subjects I could study at university	H*	HA	•
I think I would have a good time at university	H*	•	R
Going to university would offer me the opportunity to become more independent	H	•	R
I'm considering university because there aren't any jobs around here	•	•	R
My parents want me to do a university course	H*	•	U*
Most of my friends will probably go to university	H*	•	•
My teachers have encouraged me to aim for university	H*	•	•

EXAMPLE • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
U = *urban subgroup in significantly more agreement than rural subgroup*
*U** = *urban subgroup in much more agreement than rural subgroup*

In highlighting these differences, the intention is not to stereotype students. This would be misleading and inaccurate, for large variations are generally found within student subgroups as well as between them. Consequently, there will be individuals and particular regions and communities which defy the macro level trends in the dataset. Furthermore, the differences between subgroups on individual items can be small and in themselves may not be particularly important. However, the aggregate effect of small, repeated differences in the personal aspirations and assessment of the attainability of higher education of subpopulations is important. The cumulative effect of many small differences in attitudes and aspirations provides a clear-cut empirical picture of the reasons that lie behind the observed differences in participation rates.

As table 9.1 indicates, lower SES students, on average, report less likelihood of experiencing possible 'encouraging' factors. Higher SES students on the other hand, benefit from a greater likelihood of believing that university will result in desirable career outcomes, and from stronger perceptions of parental and teacher encouragement.

Significantly, urban students are more likely than rural students to believe that their parents want them to do a university course. Nevertheless, rural students are more likely than their urban peers to experience certain encouraging factors. These are associated with looking for independence, with the belief that life at university will be exciting, or with an interest in university because of the absence of available employment. On close inspection, each of these encouraging factors is perhaps peripheral or an indirect reason for attending university, rather than a commitment to the idea and value of higher education in its own right.

Table 9.2, reporting 'discouraging' factors, reveals compelling patterns that do much to explain the under-representation in higher education of people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds and people living in rural or isolated Australia. Both lower SES students and rural students are more likely on average than their respective counterparts to see a university degree as less relevant to their future and to be worried by the overall cost of university.

These differences in student attitudes find maximum expression in students' actual intentions for life immediately after school. Higher SES students have a much stronger intention to do full-time or part-time university study (nearly 70 per cent of them plan to do so) than lower or medium SES students (42 and 50 per cent respectively). In a similar but less extreme fashion, 58 per cent of urban students intend to enrol in university, a proportion higher than that of all rural subgroups, which range from 46 per cent for low access rural students to 54 per cent for high access rural students. Over one in five low access students report that they have no intention at all of going to university.

Clearly, some young people living in rural Australia make an early decision that there is a pleasant and rewarding life to be lived in the part of Australia they love, and employment may be available for which a university qualification is

neither necessary nor seen as helpful. The decision not to pursue higher education may be made with no regrets and may not be perceived by them as a personal loss or a dream unfulfilled.

Equally, there are other young people who may hold ambitions to attend university but are hindered by a perceived obstacle. Cost is one of these. There have been substantial increases in the cost of university fees, for all students whatever their background, and hefty additional costs of accommodation for rural students who leave home to attend university — which is a necessity for many and is even the firm intention of most who live close to regional campuses. When these costs are coupled with generally lower rural family incomes, a potent deterrent, perhaps a sheer hurdle, is established.

While the majority of students seem to have a sketchy understanding of the actual costs of going to university, their perception of the costs and the anticipated burden on family finances or incapacity of family income to meet the costs, are major concerns for many rural students and many from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This is a direct negative influence on their decision-making. Rural students considering higher education also anticipate a serious upheaval in their lives, though this is possibly not unwelcome — many wish to be taken out of their 'comfort zone'.

Despite the discouraging effect or barrier imposed by the expense of attending university, this is far from the only explanation for imbalances in participation in higher education. For some students, higher education is seen as unattainable: the subjects they are studying limit their options, or they lack confidence in their academic ability. These beliefs are more likely to be held by students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those with low access to university campuses, though not by rural students overall.

For other students, there is no obvious barrier in their way, rather there is an absence of the incentive that derives from a family and community tradition of valuing higher education, of knowing the options, and of being aware of the possibilities for personal development and careers — the 'encouraging' effects of cultural capital. Effective dissemination of information might help to break down the intangible sense of the 'otherness' of university culture identified in this study.

A backdrop for this study, and an important influence on young people's decisions about higher education, is the broader context of youth in Australia. This study is conducted in the midst of some concern and speculation about the extent of disillusionment among young people, especially in view of limited youth labour markets and increases in the levels of youth unemployment. The study did not set out specifically to examine the impact of these issues, nevertheless the information collected both by survey and interviews does not show widespread youth alienation, lack of optimism or cynicism. However, the project reflects the views of a self-selecting sample of young people — those who are still at school and whose willingness to participate in the research is probably a sign of a reasonable level of optimism. Perhaps missing from the dataset are the views of students at the fringes who may feel marginalised.

Table 9.2 Student Subgroups in Greatest Agreement with Factors that Potentially Discourage Higher Education Participation

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	LOCATION	
		ACCESS	COMMUNITY CONTEXT
	L = lower SES H = higher SES	LA = low access HA = high access	R = rural U = urban
I don't see any point in me going to university	L*	LA	R
A TAFE course would be more useful to me than a university course	L*	LA	•
A university qualification is not necessary for the job I want	L*	LA	R*
A TAFE course would be more affordable for me than university	L*	•	R*
I would have to support myself financially if I went to university	L	•	R*
The cost of university fees may stop me attending	L*	•	R*
My family probably can't afford the costs of supporting me at university	L*	•	R*
I want to start earning a proper income as soon as I leave school	L*	•	R
It would be difficult for me to find affordable accommodation if I went to university	L	•	R*
I would probably have to leave home if I were to attend university	•	LA*	R*
I don't think my results will be good enough to get into any courses that interest me	L*	LA	•
I probably won't have the subjects required for courses that might interest me	L*	LA	•
If I went to university, I would lose touch with my friends	•	•	R*
Getting organised for university is so complicated I don't know where to start	L	•	R

EXAMPLE • = *no significant difference between subgroups in column*
R = rural subgroup in significantly more agreement than urban subgroup
R = rural subgroup in much higher agreement than urban subgroup*

10

Making a Difference

Differences in students' attitudes towards education and training as they reach the nexus between the secondary and tertiary sectors have implications for their lifelong learning. The context of this project is growing international endorsement of lifelong learning as a social objective, a goal firmly reiterated for Australia in the West Review of Higher Education. The lifelong learning objective is based on the assumption that a 'learning society', in addition to conferring important individual social and economic benefits, will be an imperative for maintaining national macroeconomic competitiveness in a world of rapid social change. Yet, despite consensus on the desirability of learning throughout life and commitment to social justice in educational opportunity, the ways in which formal educational systems can be reconfigured to maximise such opportunities for all people are not yet well understood.

The present social imbalances in school completion rates and higher education participation indicate that the concept of lifelong learning, as far as it involves formal education, borders on a myth for some Australians. In particular, socioeconomic background and geographical location are associated with unambiguous patterns of educational advantage and disadvantage for Australians.

The rural-urban imbalance in Australian higher education participation is unacceptable. It has far-reaching consequences for the development of rural Australia and for the nation as a whole. The lower higher education participation rates of rural and isolated people are an integral component in a cycle of rural disadvantage.

Universities have a key role to play in Australia's rural and regional development by influencing the socioeconomic profile of rural communities. In the past decade, universities have implemented many programs to alleviate disparities in participation in higher education. Disappointingly, these programs have done little, if anything, to budge the participation share of Australians from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and from rural and isolated regions. This experience suggests that the present gaps cannot be narrowed without a thorough reconceptualisation of the problem, renewed commitment, and fresh strategies. This is not to suggest, however, that there are simple correctives for either of these equity groups, especially for rural and isolated people at a time during which some rural communities are experiencing severely depressed economies and reduced infrastructures.

Four Main Conclusions

The study offers four insights into the challenge of raising the higher education participation rates of rural and isolated people. Each has implications for policy development.

1. Coordinated, integrated policy measures are necessary

The lower participation rates of rural and isolated people in higher education are determined by many factors outside the immediate control of the higher education system — such as lower school completion rates, or limited local graduate employment opportunities. University equity programs that focus on the school-university transition stage are unlikely to influence these dimensions of the issue. New policies and programs will not be successful unless the breadth of the problem is ackowledged. A broad set of national strategies, coordinated through school, higher education, employment and regional development policies, is an essential step.

2. Initiatives must have a dual focus — on improving the relevance of higher education and on reducing barriers to attainability

To build more effective programs to encourage and support the higher education participation of rural and isolated people, it is necessary to recognise the interwoven reasons for inequality, what Connell (1991: 75) referred to as ' ... the complex and powerful social dynamic that is evident in educational inequality in rural areas'. With this in mind, the notion of 'barriers' to higher education may be misleading. The present participation imbalance cannot be traced to a single barrier or series of barriers at or near the point of higher education entry, but is the cumulative effect of a social and economic environment that makes higher education seem less attractive, less relevant and less attainable. Improving the higher education participation of rural people is not merely a matter of removing or reducing the inhibiting effect of physical distance from a university, and the associated cost of leaving home to study, but also involves raising perceptions of the relevance and benefits of higher education, and building incentives and encouragement in communities and families. Boosting the 'encouraging' factors is likely to be more critical in achieving long-term gains.

3. Collaborative initiatives are required at multiple stages during secondary school

Attitudes towards post-school education are shaped well before the final years of school. There is unlikely therefore to be a single, critical juncture during the senior secondary years at which policy intervention is appropriate — rather, initiatives designed to raise perceptions of the value of completing school and the attainability of higher education as early as the junior and middle secondary school years may be effective. These long-term interventions should not only

target students, but also the significant adults that influence student attitudes and decisions. Such programs should be jointly conducted by the secondary and tertiary sectors.

4. New equity initiatives must carefully target regions and individuals

A key conclusion from this study is that overlapping membership of equity target groups is the main locus of disadvantage. In fact, diversity in student attitudes is associated in the main part with socioeconomic status. While policy has consistently treated rural and isolated people and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as distinct equity target groups, advances might be made by targeting patterns of individual membership of both these equity target groups.

The focus group interviews conducted for this study also highlight the diversity of rural regions — in some, the microeconomies are strong, the pathways into higher education are well-established, and local careers are possible for graduates.

In the face of this individual and regional diversity, equity policies and programs should carefully target regions and within them the students likely to be most disadvantaged. In particular, any steps to reduce the actual and perceived expense of higher education should be carefully targeted at regions and individuals.

More effective targeting of individuals requires a more discriminating methodology than the present postcode indices. While postcodes provide a readily available basis for identifying rurality, isolation and socioeconomic status at an aggregate level, they are crude and inadequate indicators of individual educational disadvantage. As an alternative measure, Western, McMillan and Durrington (1998) have recommended that distance to a university campus be used for classifying students as low, medium and high access. However, this suggestion has shortcomings. In the first instance, the use of an access indicator based on distance has the unfortunate effect of further embedding the mistaken assumption that distance is the prime causal factor. In addition, as the present study clearly shows, if this measure alone were used to measure potential disadvantage it would fail to identify students who experience a disadvantage in aspirations that derives largely from their community context. In particular, a 'high access' classification based on distance to a campus conflates urban and rural students who differ considerably in their options for choosing institutions and campuses, and in their perceptions of the relevance of higher education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations outline an integrated policy approach to improving the higher education participation of rural and isolated people. They are broadly addressed to the federal and state government and to administrators and educators in both the secondary and tertiary sectors.

There are many pathways into higher education; however, the obvious key to raising the participation rates of rural Australians is to lift the rate of student retention in the senior school years and to improve the direct school-university transfer rate. Many of the recommendations therefore focus on assisting students to avoid foreclosing their options in the middle secondary years, raising aspirations and attainability in the senior secondary years, and reducing inhibitors near the point of entry to higher education for school-leavers.

An Integrated Policy Framework and a Rural Education and Employment Taskforce

It is evident from the social and economic complexity of educational disadvantage that fragmented strategies will not be effective. The issue cuts across portfolio lines, and across federal, state and local government responsibilities. A coordinated policy approach from both federal and state government is urgently needed. With the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport due to release a report in 1999, there is presently an opportunity to develop an integrated policy framework embracing rural development, education, family support and employment, acknowledging, in particular, the importance of universities and higher education to rural development.

Two cornerstone recommendations from this study, therefore, are for the creation of an integrated suite of policies and the establishment of a high profile Rural Education and Employment Taskforce to oversee a series of new initiatives. These two steps would provide a timely, imaginative and visionary statement of commitment to the development of rural and regional Australia.

Recommendation 1

- Federal and state government should develop an integrated policy framework, across portfolios and departments, in which narrowing the higher education participation gap between rural and urban Australians is one element in an overall plan for rural and regional development. The framework should focus on coordinated strategies in three areas:
  - improving school completion rates;

- improving access to and completion of higher education and other post-secondary education and training; and
- improving the employment prospects for graduates in rural areas.

Recommendation 2

■ As part of this policy framework, the federal government should establish a Rural Education and Employment Taskforce whose terms of reference are to oversee a series of new initiatives for improving the education and employment opportunities for young people in country Australia. The Rural Education and Employment Taskforce should be responsible for monitoring, as appropriate, each of the recommendations that follow, giving special priority to Recommendation 3 for increasing the opportunities for rural students and their families to be familiarised with higher education during junior and middle secondary years .

Familiarisation with Higher Education in Junior/Middle Secondary School

Efforts are needed to improve the exposure of rural students to universities during the junior and middle secondary years. Many rural students in the senior secondary years lack the familiarity with the culture of universities that is found among urban students. Universities are alien places for many rural students and there is a mythology about student life. University culture needs to be 'demystified' for first generation higher education entrants.

It would be inappropriate to propose specific program details, especially since initiatives of this kind are intensive, but this exposure should take place as part of the collaborative ventures proposed in recommendation 4, and should involve two-way visits. The involvement of students' parents, particularly those who have never participated in higher education themselves, would be worthwhile.

Recommendation 3

■ Original equity initiatives are required during the junior and middle secondary years to encourage students not to foreclose their options by raising student, parent and community awareness of the value of completing school, the attainability of higher education and other post-secondary education and training, and the culture of universities.

Sustained Trials of Collaborative Equity Strategies

Since the higher education equity programs of the past have had limited effects for rural and isolated people and people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, there is an urgent need for sustained trials of new approaches to reducing

entrenched educational disadvantage. We propose that advances might be made in understanding effective strategies through the funding of a small number of innovative 'lighthouse' trials in selected regions of Australia. Recognising the complexity of the problem, these initiatives should involve schools, TAFE colleges and universities in collaborative action. The collaborating institutions should have freedom to develop and implement programs based on understanding of the local context, though some specific suggestions are offered in other recommendations. In regard to selection of pilot regions, community socioeconomic status is a key factor. The inclusion of a lower SES urban region would provide valuable comparative information.

Recommendation 4

- To explore the effectiveness of new equity strategies, the federal government should fund for a three-year period three or four collaborative equity ventures between universities, TAFE colleges and schools. These 'lighthouse' equity initiatives should be in selected regions and should target the individual students most likely to be educationally disadvantaged within them.

Strategic Financial Mechanisms — Improved Assistance for Rural Students and Increased Incentives for Universities to Cater for Them

Recommendations 5 and 6 are closely linked. Financial assistance for rural and isolated students must be given a high priority. While there are currently financial assistance schemes for disadvantaged students, cost remains a significant deterrent for many rural students who reach the point of eligibility for university entry. A number of options are conceivable to reduce the combined cost burden for rural students of fees and living away from home expenses. These might include, for instance, start-up assistance for relocation, differential HECS arrangements, or HECS rebates — any new financial assistance mechanisms that remove or reduce financial disincentives and/or offer strategic financial incentives. Since the impact of costs and its deterrent effects are experienced at different times and in different ways by particular students and their families, a single mechanism is likely to be less effective than the composite influence of a number of measures.

With high levels of income insecurity in some country areas, many rural students have particular reservations about the prospect of a HECS liability. The project encountered fears about the burden of HECS ('paying it off for the rest of your life'). As well as financial assistance, rural students and their families will benefit from accurate liability information on which to make informed choices.

Associated with improving the financial assistance available to defray the overall costs for rural students and their families, is the need to look more closely at whether strategic funding measures can improve the incentives for universities to act collaboratively (rather than competitively) to attract more rural students. Equity targets have been part of university profiles yet universities require even greater incentives to enrol, welcome and support rural students. Presently there

is not the financial inducement for universities to attract and cater for the needs of rural students as actively as they do for, say, international students. Consideration could be given to the possibilities for a scholarship-like scheme for the most disadvantaged students, in which scholarship holders bring with them support funding for the institution they attend. Such a scheme has the potential to serve two purposes: it would be of symbolic and practical value to students, while at the same time focusing the marketing and recruitment activities of universities.

Recommendation 5

- The federal government should introduce measures to reduce the costs associated with higher education for lower and medium SES rural and isolated students. In addition, the federal government and universities should provide rural students with better information on the cost of attending university, including HECS loan liability and repayment requirements.

Recommendation 6

- The federal government should introduce stronger financial incentives for universities to work collaboratively to seek enrolments from rural and isolated people, in particular from the most educationally disadvantaged subgroups.

Multiple Entry Points and Work/Study Options

Continued rethinking of the entry points, re-entry points and pathways through formal education opportunities is required if all Australians are to gain access to a post-secondary education. Clearly the pathways in post-compulsory education are now far more complex than the familiar linear school-university progression. The boundaries between secondary education, vocational education and training, and higher education are less clear-cut than before, as are the distinctions between the providers. VET programs are being offered in schools, TAFE colleges provide senior secondary programs, and so on. The continued development of new and innovative approaches to 'seamlessness' are necessary if greater numbers of rural students are to participate in post-compulsory education. At the very least, universities and schools need to work collaboratively to avoid curricula and subject choices that limit students' post-secondary options. More ambitiously, in a very flexible environment it is possible to imagine large numbers of senior secondary students commencing tertiary programs while in their senior secondary years, thus building awareness and confidence while opening up later options. However, the pressure of senior school certificates and university entrance scores restricts the development of innovation of this kind.

It is important for universities to recognise the importance of dual work/study options in making higher education financially viable for rural students. Assistance in securing part-time employment and sensitive curricula and scheduling would be practical steps that would encourage rural students to believe that the immediate costs of university education are manageable.

Recommendation 7

- Universities, TAFE colleges and schools should continue to build flexible pathways, flexible study arrangements, and credit transfer arrangements. In particular, rural students are likely to benefit from multiple entry points to higher education, including seamless TAFE-higher education pathways, and curricula that permit appropriate work and study arrangements.

Graduate Employment Possibilities

There seems little point in encouraging rural young people to undertake a higher education if there is a lack of graduate employment possibilities in their home regions, or if higher education simply contributes to able young people leaving rural Australia for the major cities. This study suggests that many rural students are uncertain about the vocational outcomes that are available or likely if they complete a university degree. Possibly some do not wish to be perceived as 'over-qualified' for the local labour market. Yet changes in work and technology require Australians to have higher levels of education and training than ever before, and rural communities need a critical mass of graduates.

Recommendation 8

- As part of rural and regional development, the federal government should explore opportunities for improving the prospects for graduate employment in country Australia.

Research into the Higher Education Participation of Students from Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds

As we have highlighted in the report, socioeconomic effects outweigh those of location. With a prime focus on rural students, this study did not examine in any detail the specific effects of family and cultural influences or the rising costs of higher education on urban students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Since the higher education participation rates of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remain substantially and unacceptably below those of other Australians, there is a need for research to identify and examine the factors influencing the educational decisions of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially those in urban areas. In the longer term, systematic monitoring of the factors influencing educational participation for all identified equity groups would provide an essential database for policy formation, one which is presently unavailable in Australia.

Recommendation 9

- Students socioeconomic backgrounds are stronger influences on their attitudes towards higher education than their geographical locations. Further research is needed, including extensive focus group interviews, to identify the factors that continue to inhibit the higher education participation of school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Research of this kind would be of immediate value in policy formation. In addition, systematic longitudinal monitoring of trends in educational participation and attitudes for both rural and isolated people and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds would be valuable.

In conducting this study, the project team sense the need for a grassroots attitudinal shift in schools and universities. Educational leaders and teachers need to be more aware of the class differentials in educational opportunity in Australian society and of the unacceptability of these differentials. There may be a low level of awareness among both secondary and tertiary educators of the extent of the participation disparities for rural/isolated people and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Understandably, many people working in education find it difficult to grasp the full extent of the social inequities in school completion rates and higher education participation rates, since these are abstractions at an aggregate level. Most people working in school and universities do not experience or confront the problem in their day-to-day work.

Rural and isolated people and people of lower socioeconomic background are not visible groups on campus, nor are their interests served by identifiable lobby groups. A critical step towards social equity in educational opportunity may be greater awareness and action on the problem by educators and educational administrators at all levels, especially community opinion leaders such as school principals and academics in leadership positions.

Appendix 1

Selected Equity Groups as Per Cent of Non-overseas Students by Australian H.E. Institutions

Table A1 *Selected Equity Groups as Per Cent of Non-overseas Students by Australian H.E. Institutions*

	Rural	*Isolated*	*Lower SES*
New South Wales			
Avondale College	18	3	15
Charles Sturt University	48	2	15
Macquarie University	4	0	5
Southern Cross University	61	1	18
University of New England	43	3	18
University of Newcastle	18	0	26
University of New South Wales	7	0	6
University of Sydney	8	1	7
University of Technology Sydney	4	0	6
University of Western Sydney	5	0	10
University of Wollongong	15	0	11
Victoria			
Deakin University	21	1	11
La Trobe University	29	0	12
Marcus Oldham Farm M/ment College	61	21	42
Monash University	14	1	7
RMIT	10	0	12
Swinburne University of Technology	7	0	8
University of Ballarat	69	1	14
University of Melbourne	14	0	8
Victoria University of Technology	6	0	25
Queensland			
Central Queensland University	66	7	34
Griffith University	14	1	22
James Cook University	41	9	23
Queensland University of Technology	15	2	19
University of Queensland	20	2	19
University of Southern Queensland	54	6	32

continued

Table A1 *Selected Equity Groups as Per Cent of Non-overseas Students by Australian H.E. Institutions (continued)*

	Rural	*Isolated*	*Lower SES*
Western Australia			
Curtin University of Technology	6	7	21
Edith Cowan University	10	6	18
Murdoch University	8	7	23
University of Western Australia	5	4	12
South Australia			
Flinders University	10	2	14
University of Adelaide	10	2	17
University of South Australia	15	4	23
Tasmania			
Australian Maritime College	36	3	22
University of Tasmania	42	1	28
Batchelor College	1	60	45
Northern Territory University	2	14	3
ACT			
ANU	15	0	5
University of Canberra	14	0	4
Multi-State			
Australian Catholic University	17	1	11
TOTAL	**18**	**2**	**14**

The table does not present equity group details for AFTRS, NIDA and ADFA, but these figures have been included in the calculation of the total. Source: Andrews et al (1998).

Appendix 2

The Definition and Measurement of Socioeconomic Background and Location

The definition and measurement of rurality and socioeconomic status for the purposes of higher education participation is conceptually and methodologically complex. Definition and measurement were critical to this project in two ways: first, in the creation of an appropriate student sample; second, in defining appropriate subgroups for comparative analysis.

Presently, the measure of socioeconomic status and geographical location available to the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs is derived from the postcode of student's permanent home address. Indices (ABS 1990a, ABS 1990b and DPIE 1994) are used to calculate aggregate participation rates for rural and isolated people and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The setting of thresholds for high/medium/low socioeconomic status and urban/rural/isolated location is arbitrary.

Area measures based on population average are widely recognised to be inadequate for measuring individual educational disadvantage. In the case of socioeconomic background, a regional or suburban average is clearly an inappropriate measure of the status and wealth of individual families. For measuring rurality and isolation and the possible education disadvantage of living a long way from a campus, the postcode indices have particular shortcomings for people who live near regional universities or the rural campuses of urban universities.

Prior to the present study, Western, McMillan and Durrington (1998) re-examined the measurement of socioeconomic background and location under the Evaluations and Investigations Programme, taking into account the reliability and validity of various potential measures and the associated costs of data collection. As an alternative to the present postcode indices, the authors recommended that DETYA collect for each higher education student during the annual statistical data collection:

- the distance of permanent home address from a university campus, from which students would be classified as high, medium or low access; and
- parental education and/or parental occupation for both parents, from which socioeconomic subcategories could be determined.

The first recommendation is based on the assumption that educational disadvantage for rural students is in part related to lack of proximity to a university campus. It is argued that the advantage of this measure is that it

would avoid the present problem of rural people who live close to a rural campus or regional university being aggregated with rural people who are vast distances from a campus, thus allowing better discrimination in targeting people for access and equity initiatives.

In collecting demographic information from survey respondents the present project followed the Western et al recommendations. Highest parental education was chosen as an appropriate measure of socioeconomic background, as it was believed to be a better indicator of the likely encouragement and commitment of families to their children's education. It is recognised, however, that it may not be a particularly good indicator of family wealth and household capacity to support the various costs of university study.

Some adaptation of the location measures recommended by Western et al was believed necessary for analysing and reporting the project data. This adaptation involved separating 'high access' students (those living within 150 km of a university) into two categories, high access/rural and high access/urban, on the assumption that students in country areas may experience rural effects that are impediments to higher education participation — such as limited unavailability of local employment opportunities for graduates or perceived lack of peer or community encouragement — whether or not they live close to a regional campus. The decision was subsequently justified by the significant differences found between the attitudes of high access/urban and high access/rural students in the sample. These findings expose a serious limitation of the Western et al proposals. Clearly, personal socioeconomic background and distance from a university are not the only factors leading to rural educational disadvantage — there are further differences in attitude and outlook between urban and rural students that accrue from community context. Because the measures recommended by Western et al fail to capture 'rurality' they will not be adequate for identifying all individuals who possibly will experience genuine educational disadvantage.

In framing the study and defining student subgroups for data analysis, the principal assumption has been that the disadvantage of rural and isolated people may be the effect of three interrelated factors, which, individually or in combination, may limit aspirations or access to higher education. These are listed below.

1. socioeconomic background, including family expectations and support, and knowledge of higher education options. This factor is measured in the study by highest level of parental education. This SES variable allowed the study to define three SES subgroups by banding as follows.

    - *Lower SES* parents did not attend school, attended only primary school, or attended some secondary school

- *Medium SES* parents completed secondary school and/or vocational qualification, diploma or associate diploma (e.g. TAFE)
- *Higher SES* parents completed a university degree

2. physical **access**, that is the distance from home to a university campus, measured by self-reported distance of permanent place of residence to the nearest campus; and
3. **community context**, which includes the local social, cultural and economic context of young people, such as community perceptions of the relevance of higher education to life and employment, the range and level of local employment possibilities, and the relationship between university education and employment opportunities. This factor is measured in the study using the ABS postcode classification of geographical areas.

The last two factors are concerned with student **location**. The latter, community context, was included in the belief that student attitudes towards the relevance, attractiveness and attainability of higher education would be related significantly to the socioeconomic and cultural differences that exist between urban and rural areas. Therefore, it was assumed that imbalances in urban and rural higher education participation rates are influenced not only by family socioeconomic circumstances and physical access to a campus, but also by the characteristics of the community environment in which students are living.

The two location variables allowed the study to define the following four student subgroups.

- *Low access* more than 300 kilometres to a university
- *Medium access* 151-300 kilometres to a university
- *High access/rural* less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as rural
- *High access/urban* less than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as urban

The low/medium/high banding follows the Western et al recommendations. Low and medium access students are necessarily rural students, and urban students must be high access. Student home postcodes provided a convenient means of dividing the large high access subgroup, as defined on distance to the campus nearest home, into two distinct categories.

Appendix 3

Data Collection

The project surveyed Year 10, 11 and 12 students in three states, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, with the 'When I leave school' questionnaire. A total of 7593 responses were received, 7023 of which were useable. To complement the survey information, focus groups interviews were conducted in rural and isolated schools in Western Australia and Victoria. Interviews were conducted in 20 schools with approximately 350 Year 10, 11 and 12 students.

'When I leave school ... ' Questionnaire

The conceptual framework for the survey instrument is presented in chapter three. The eight-page questionnaire is divided into six sections. The questionnaire begins by asking students to indicate their present intentions after completion of secondary school and their degree of confidence about realising these aspirations. Four sections explore the reasons for these responses, moving logically through:

- 'Your personal goals and priorities';
- 'Your views about school and further study'; and
- 'Your thoughts about the possibility of going on to university'; to end with a section,
- 'For students who are planning or hoping to do a university course'.

In these central sections, general aspirations and perceptions, and the influence of others, are investigated by asking respondents to indicate the extent of agreement with a series of propositions, and the degree of importance of various factors/influences. They are also asked about subjects offered at their schools, and the extent of their knowledge about costs associated with going to university, sources of financial assistance and distance education options. The final section asks for personal and demographic details, including the information used to construct subgroups for analysis purposes: home postcode; distance to the nearest university; and parental education and occupational details.

The questionnaire is designed for urban, as well as rural students, so the exploration of the possible effects of rurality is undertaken through items dealing with factors which are of relevance to all: for example, 'Going to university would offer me the opportunity to become more independent'.

The instrument is available to researchers on request from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

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Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted in ten rural schools in Victoria and ten rural or isolated schools in Western Australia, including a boarding school. Schools were selected to give coverage of the regional variation in each state. Approximately 350 students were interviewed.

The interview schedules for the focus groups were based on the conceptual framework used for the survey but focussed on eliciting the relative importance that students attribute to contributing factors in their decisions about post-secondary education and training.

The Project's Surveying Strategy

Two approaches were used to survey students. First, a stratified sample of 8000 students was randomly selected from the databases of the Victorian Board of Studies (Year 11 and 12 students), the Curriculum Council of Western Australia (Year 12 students), and the NSW Board of Studies (Year 12 students). The students in this sample received questionnaires directly by mail to their home address. Second, a stratified sample of 180 schools — 60 in each of the three states — was mailed batches of questionnaires with a request to distribute, collect and return responses. The school sample allowed the project to survey students not accessible through the central databases in each of the states.

Table A2 Summary of Sample Size by State and Year Level

	Year 10	*Year 11*	*Year 12*	*Total*
Victoria	1800 (schools)	2000 (central database)	2000 (central database)	**5800**
WA	1800* (schools)	1800* (schools)	2000 (central database)	**5600**
NSW	1800* (schools)	1800* (schools)	2000 (central database)	**5600**
Total	**5400**	**5600**	**6000**	**17 000**

* *Schools were requested to distribute questionnaires equally among Year 10 and Year 11 students.*

During the initial planning of the study, consideration was given to approximate student numbers Australia-wide according to geographic location and socioeconomic status as calculated by postcode indices.

Table A3 indicates the strong correlation between the indices for location and socioeconomic status. This analysis allowed the project to select appropriate states in which to administer the instrument and to prepare broad sample targets.

Table A3 Cross-tabulation of Residential Location and Socioeconomic Status

for Australians in 17-24 Years Age Group

		Location			
		Distant	***Country***	***Urban***	***Total***
SES	*Lower*	41 415 **1.9%**	178 140 **8.3%**	289 674 **13.5%**	509 229 **23.6%** lower SES
	Medium	39 731 **1.8%**	286 694 **13.3%**	748 064 **34.7%**	1 074 489 **49.9%** medium SES
	Higher	359 **0.02%**	13 366 **0.6%**	557 122 **25.9%**	570 847 **26.5%** higher SES
Total		81 505 **3.8%** distant	478 200 **22.2%** country	1 594 860 **74.0%** urban	2 154 565 **100%**

Calculated from 1991 census data using postcode categorisation

Questionnaire Mailed to Students

Since this study is principally a comparative analysis of population subgroups identified on residential location and socioeconomic status, it was essential that the sampling technique generated an appropriate stratification across both dimensions. As discussed in chapter 3, DETYA currently uses postcode of student home permanent home address and two indices for classifying these postcodes (ABS 1990a, ABS 1990b, DPIE 1994) for measuring geographical location and socioeconomic background for the purposes of monitoring participation rates. Location is defined as urban, rural, or isolated, and socioeconomic status as high, medium, and low. Notwithstanding the previously discussed shortcomings of an area-based index for measuring individual characteristics, student and school postcodes were the only variables available to the research team for preparation of the survey samples.

Once access was granted to the Boards of Studies databases, a similar analysis was conducted on each dataset. Sample targets were selected for each of the nine subgroup cells in the location-SES matrix. To ensure that the project would have subgroup cells with sufficient respondents to permit reliable analysis, increased sample targets were chosen wherever the cell sizes were small.

In total, 8000 students were surveyed using this method. The response rate to the first direct mail to students was 39.7 per cent. After reminder questionnaires were sent to non-respondents, the total number of responses was increased to 4079, a response rate of 51 per cent.

Questionnaires Mailed to Schools

Students whose home address details could not be accessed through central databases were surveyed through their schools. Year 10 students in Victoria, and Year 10 and 11 students in Western Australia and New South Wales, were surveyed in this manner. The sample was chosen from all Government, Catholic and Independent schools registered with the appropriate State Board of Studies (Victoria and NSW) and The Western Australian Curriculum Council.

Again use was made of the ABS indices to identify school and select the school sample. Schools were classified according to their geographical location and the socioeconomic status of the region or suburb. While the postcode indices do not differentiate between schools on the basis of distance from university campuses, this was considered during sampling by taking account of distance from a capital city or regional city.

For each state, a master list of schools was constructed showing categories in terms of socioeconomic status and geographical location. Sixty schools were selected from each state list, 30 rural/isolated schools and 30 urban schools. Each group of thirty schools comprised 20 government schools, seven Catholic schools, and three independent schools, in approximate proportion to the national attendance by sector. These procedures resulted in the distribution of sample schools reported in table A4.

Table A4 Distribution of Schools in Sample

Victoria					
Rural Sample	HC	MC	LC	MD	LD
Government	11	7	2		
Catholic	5	2			
Independent	3				
Totals:	**19**	**9**	**2**		
Urban Sample	HU	MU	LU		
Government	7	7	6		
Catholic	3	2	2		
Independent	1	2			
Totals:	**11**	**11**	**8**		
Western Australia					
Rural Sample	HC	MC	LC	MD	LD
Government	2	7	5	6	
Catholic	1	2	2	2	
Independent	1	1			
Totals:	**4**	**10**	**7**	**8**	
Urban Sample	HU	MU	LU		
Government	5	10	5		
Catholic	2	3	2		
Independent	2	3	2		
Totals:	**9**	**16**	**9**		
New South Wales					
Rural Sample	HC	MC	LC	MD	LD
Government	1	7	8	1	3
Catholic	1	3	3		
Independent	3				
Totals:	**5**	**10**	**11**	**1**	**3**
Urban Sample	HU	MU	LU		
Government	6	11	3		
Catholic	2	4	1		
Independent	2	1			
Totals:	**10**	**16**	**4**		

H= higher SES *U= Urban*
M= medium SES *C= Country*
L= lower SES *D= Distant*

A summary of the school survey response patterns is presented in table A5 below. The number of returns from individual schools varied considerably. Notional student response rates are provided for illustrative purposes, calculated on the assumption that all questionnaires were distributed.

Some delays were experienced in receiving approval to conduct the research in NSW government schools. The later dispatch of the questionnaires to NSW schools resulted in a lower response rate in that state.

The total number of student responses returned by schools was 3698. Some responses were incomplete and were discarded, leaving 3501 responses.

Table A5 Response Rates to School Survey

	School response			*Notional student response*		
	Number of schools surveyed	*Number of respondents*	*School response rate*	*Number of questionnaires provided to schools*	*Number of student responses*	*Notional student response rate*
Victoria	60	50	83 %	1800	854	47 %
WA	60	42	70 %	3600	2031	56 %
NSW	60	27	45 %	3600	813	23 %
Overall	**180**	**119**	**66 %**	**9000**	**3698**	**41 %**

Useable Responses and Response Patterns

The analyses conducted for the report relied on respondents providing information on their parents' education, self-reported distance from a university, and postcode or permanent home address. Some respondents did not provide full information and these responses could not be included in most analyses. In addition, the home postcodes of some respondents could not be classified because they are not included in the 1990 ABS index. These responses also could not be analysed. After putting aside all non-useable responses, 7023 responses were available to the project for analysis (table A6).

The survey received a lower response rate from males. This pattern of lower male response was most pronounced in the lower socioeconomic subgroup (table A7).

The data analysis relied on self-reported distance from a university. Students reporting large distances for a campus may be unaware of campuses closer to their homes. Alternatively, students may mistakenly report the distance to a post-secondary institution such as a TAFE campus.

There is always a possibility with research of this kind that students interested in and committed to school and the possibility of higher education are more likely to respond.

Table A6 *Number of Useable Responses, by Respondent Socioeconomic Background and Location*

		Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
	Low access	376	580	323	1279
Rural	Medium access	127	199	111	437
	High access/rural	491	862	641	1994
Urban	High access/urban	811	1386	1116	3313
All		**1805**	**3027**	**2191**	**7023**

Table A7 *Gender of Respondents, by Socioeconomic Background and Location*

		Lower SES	*Medium SES*	*Higher SES*	*All*
	Low access	245 F 128 M	327 F 247 M	173 F 150 M	745 F 525 M
Rural	Medium access	87 F 38 M	122 F 77 M	66 F 45 M	275 F 160 M
	High access/rural	332 F 157 M	483 F 377 M	351 F 287 M	1166 F 821 M
Urban	High access/urban	491 M 316 F	757 F 628 M	622 F 496 M	1870 F 1440 M
All		**1155 F** **639 M**	**1689 F** **1329 M**	**1212 F** **978 M**	**4056 F** **2946 M**

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